Games / Anime / Multimedia

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Letter from the Editor

Gearing up

The week leading up to Play's deadline this month was a tragic and painful experience. You see, I began playing Metal Gear Solid 4, and then stopped playing Metal Gear Solid 4 in preparation for tackling the mountain of pre-E3 work that towered before me. I don't often think about a game... Let me rephrase: I don't *ever* think about a game after I've disconnected from a session, at least not in the way that matters. And yet there I was, a number of times, thinking about what I had seen, what I had done, where I was to be transported next.

Metal Gear 4 is not a game for everyone, of course, and it makes an array of choices that are as unfortunate as games half its pedigree. I could go on about where the game stumbles, and I could go on about where it soars, but what sticks with me is the feeling of a unified vision so assured that there really is nothing else like it.

Hideo Kojima appears to have his heart stamped into every frame; there is a piece of an earnest artist's touch tying every bit together. This does not make it game of the year, or an automatic perfect score, it makes it a game that should be played. I say this because the game is important in some ways, it means something in some ways. You don't have to like it, but you should be aware you are missing something important by not experiencing the world of Solid Snake in some capacity.

A game far tinier in scope but no less accomplished than Metal Gear Solid 4 goes by the name of Snatcher. Some of you have never heard of it, some of you were not even playing games when the Sega CD offered this esoteric graphic-novel disguised as a game. It was also made by Hideo Kojima, obviously influenced by *Blade Runner*, and is another example of this man's inspired vision clearly coming through. I am intrigued by it to this day, perhaps more than I ever have in its latest context.

Check out our look back at Snatcher this month, beginning on page 86.

A game like Snatcher would be lost to most gamers today, but that doesn't mean oldschool design sensibilities are an antiquation best left for nostalgic musing. PSN and XBLA and Wiiware are just getting started (that's the hope, anyway), bringing us wonderful titles like Pixel JunkEden and Lost Winds, which rely on an art style that is pure fantasy. If Metal Gear isn't your thing, it would be far more productive to stop complaining about how it's overrated and find the many gems out there waiting to be discovered.

In this month's cover story, a lot of the discussion with Vigil Studios ended up focusing on how much the love for old 2D games inspired Darksiders. It's curious how I so rarely hear developers chatting enthusiastically about finding a valuable joy and inspiration in the 16-bit classics. And as Vigil's creative director Joe Madureira says himself, it's tough pulling out what makes 2D games so appealing and placing the guts into a 3D world.

Does this love for the past put a multimillion dollar, massive next-gen project on the track for success? No, but it makes me a lot more interested in a game where the makers share what I share: a love for fantasy. It's a safer bet these days to call on the military or some alpha squad or a guy who looks like he's ready to try out for a cheap action movie for late night cable to star in your game. Safe does not matter, games like Metal Gear Solid 4 matter.

"You don't have to like it, but you should be aware you are missing something important by not experiencing the world of Solid Snake in some capacity."

Read up on Darksiders, starting on page 20, and see if your own personal Metal Gear might be in the works.

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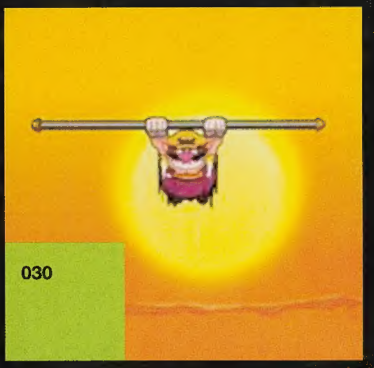

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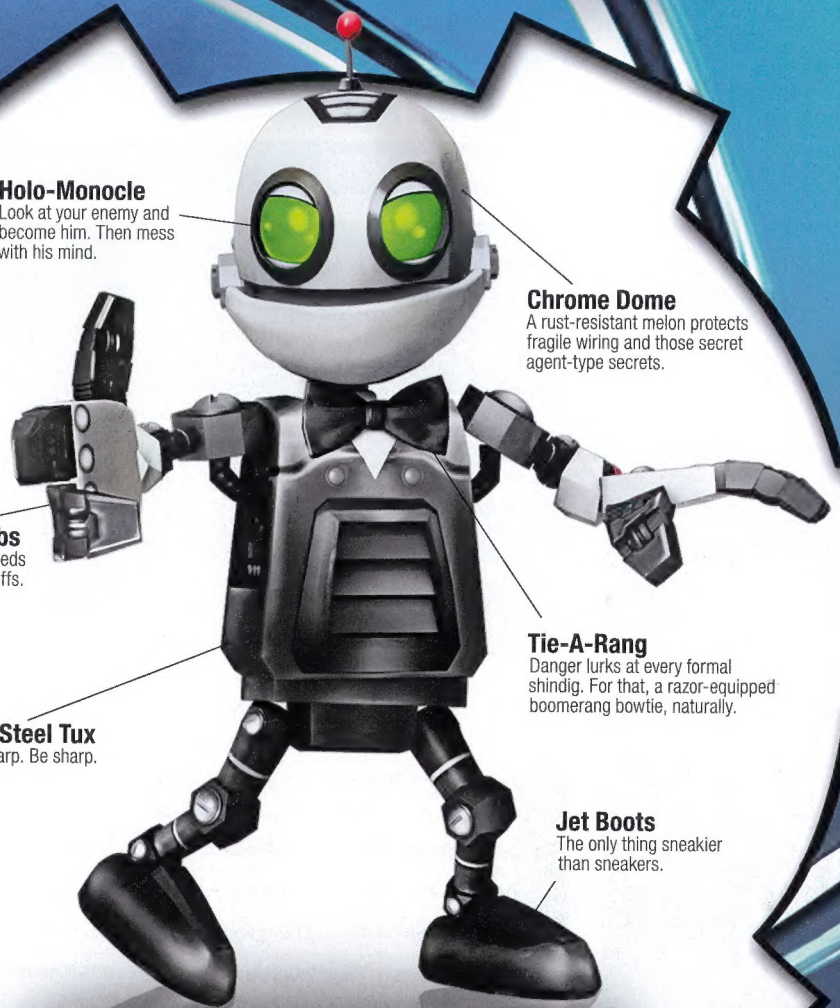
THIS TIME THE SECRET AGENT *IS* THE GADGET.



Holo-Monocle
Look at your enemy and become him. Then mess with his mind.

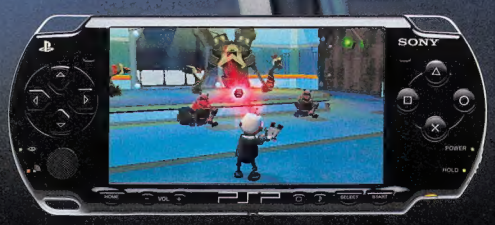
Chrome Dome
A rust-resistant melon protects fragile wiring and those secret agent-type secrets.

Cuff Link Bombs
Every secret agent needs bombs. And linked cuffs. Done and done.

Tie-A-Rang
Danger lurks at every formal shindig. For that, a razor-equipped boomerang bowtie, naturally.

Solid Steel Tux
Look sharp. Be sharp.

Jet Boots
The only thing sneakier than sneakers.



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DATABASE

AUGUST **2008**

Attack of the handhelds...

First up, we drop in on the Movie/TV/Comic Book game race to see how '08 is shaping up at the halfway point. No surprises there, yet. The best are yet to come. Not a whole lot of surprises in this month's Top 10 (other than the fact that Iron Man sold better on PS2 than 360 or PS3), but the PS3 outselling the Xbox 360 for the first time in hardware sales is definitely a milestone, especially considering GTA sales were almost double on 360. Could the rise in PS3 sales be people getting ready for Metal Gear Solid 4? Fond out next month.

Top 10 Video Game Sales May 2008

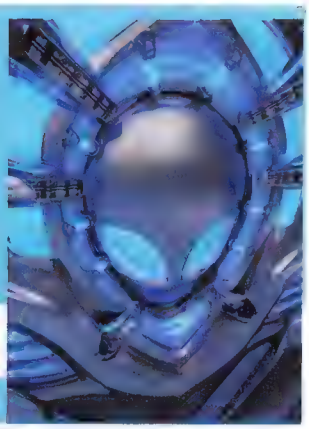
01	Grand Theft Auto IV Xbox 360 Take2 Interactive	871.3k
02	Mario Kart with wheel Wii Nintendo	787.4k
03	Wii Fit with Balance Board Wii Nintendo	687.7k
04	Grand Theft Auto IV PS3 Take2 Interactive	442.9k
05	Super Smash Bros. Brawl Wii Nintendo	294.6k
06	Iron Man PS2 Sega of America	130.6k
07	Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock Wii Activision	116.8k
08	Pokemon Mystery Dungeon Exp of Darkness NDS Nintendo	107k
09	Pokemon Mystery Dungeon Exp of Time NDS Nintendo	102k
10	MLB '08 The Show	Sony

Hardware Unit Sales May 2008 year-to-date

01	PlayStation 3	208.7k
02	PSP	182.3k
03	Xbox 360	186.6k
04	Wii	675.1k
05	Nintendo DS	452.6k

Top 5 Movie/TV/Comic Book based videogames 2008 year-to-date

01	Lego Star Wars: Complete Saga	540K
02	Iron Man	490K
03	Transformers:The Game	410K
04	Lego Star Wars II: The Original	380K
05	The Simpsons	335K



Alienware reveals new viral CG series

By the time you read this, the internet will be getting its first taste of a new CG short film being produced by Synq Studios on behalf of Alienware. The monthly shorts will feature dynamic, feature film-quality graphics that recount the otherworldly origins of Alienware systems. And they're just cool to look at. We spoke to the architect of this campaign, Alienware's Yusney Garay, for further details.

Yusney Garay, Lead Designer "Breed" campaign

play: This is pretty slick work. Why did you contract a new outfit like Sync Studios to assemble this film, considering it's the backbone of the Breed campaign?
Yusney Garay: Synq Studios is one of the first east coast full solution animation studios. They do mostly animated shorts, video game CG. And basically it's run by a couple of guys I went to school with…

Always nice to send a gig a friend's way.
Sure is, but beyond that they're actually the one studio that could do it on the east coast. We could've gone with many freelancers, but Synq has a good sized team so it worked out great.

Did the Synq artists and animators gel with the Breed campaign right away?
Once I gave the studio the script and a few reference materials, they ran with it in pre-production. I gave them styles like Spielberg, if you recall the "AI" movie he did in the '90s; and the Bjork video "Full of Love"—these types of dynamic futuristic sci-fi visuals. I developed that concept, sketched it out, and it eventually became the storyboard for the studio to reference for look and feel.

How did you merge these sci-fi themes with a larger alien premise?
As we created assets, going through the stages…anything that looked too familiar, that referenced Giger, or the Alien films, things like that—we left out and reconstructed from scratch using original alien designs and high end graphics.

Did Synq use actual Alienware systems as visual reference?
During the development we actually brought in four different Alienware systems for them to kind of get the aesthetics from it. For example, in scene 1 of Origins, you can spot the "Alien FX"—our custom lighting system—on a device. The artists incorporated these lighting and liquid effects from an Alienware desktop.

We're clearly in some kind of alien compound in scene one, Origins. Is this in space, or here on Earth? How about Area 51, the 1940s New Mexican desert…?

That's in future instalments. Initially the viewer will be taken through these corridors of the facility and experience how an Alienware is developed. Think of it as a tour of the alien production line, where you witness the conception of a system. The alien hive has been turned on. The walls of the facility are abuzz with activity.

Are we going to see or hear an alien intelligence behind the veil, or how about Area 51 scientists performing an autopsy?
A big maybe on that, for future episodes. For now you might hear someone, and see vague reflections of others, but we're not going there yet. You'll get the feeling that you're very small and the aliens are huge and advanced. You'll hear stuff like elevators, mechanical arms and other effects, but you won't even realize where you are until the end of Part One.

How close are the Breed CG segments to being complete?
We're in post production right now and should be completed by August. Scene 1 and 2 are ready for the July and August launch. We're right on schedule.

Behind every marketing campaign there's a product. Is Breed designed to push Alienware desktops, or notebooks as well?
You can think of the desktops as star and notebooks as co-star, but notebooks are also in there through the main body of the journey. You'll see the unique way they get transported to different rooms using alien technology.

Are we going to see the Breed clips in theatres or on TV?
We were trying to do something with DC and Batman, as we had a big partnership with them on Superman, but we were behind their timeline. It might still happen last minute. For now we're hitting YouTube, Myspace, Facebook, Comic Con, BlizzCon, print ads, posters—all over, looking at sports stadiums too. We also have Olivia Munn handling spots on G4. We want to hit a lot of people, general sci-fi fans, not just core gamers. I've been here for 8 of the 10 years of Alienware's life, created a lot of different campaigns. Breed is a big time animated short. It's going to appeal to sophisticated, media-wise viewers.

Have you thought about releasing an interactive 3D screensaver, where people could explore the alien facility from the Breed campaign in real-time?
That's a really good idea actually! Literally everyone on the team is tied up now, but maybe the post team—we're also doing a whole Making Of video for the campaign—could do something. We'll let you know…

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TEEN
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Mild Language
Partial Nudity
Sexual Themes
Violence
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ink

Sony's Gamepad Rumbles Back To Playstation Players

Why we love the Dual Shock 3

IT VIBRATES, DUH
Despite the motion-sensing SIXAXIS providing some gimmicky good times, it left a feedback-less void in our hands. No matter how many up, down or side-to-side antics we performed, we still weren't "feeling" our games; no kick when we got shot, no rhythmic thump when our pulse pounded towards death and no satisfying rumble when we wasted a boss. Well, that's all back, baby!

IT'S STILL GOT THE SIXAXIS TECH
Yup, it rumbles and performs motion-sensing magic—you can still pilot projectiles in Heavenly Sword and balance on logs in Uncharted: Drake's Fortune. Even better, future titles will become more adept at seamlessly marrying the two technologies; dodging bullets with motion-tech while receiving a rumble-fueled jolt when hammered with a metal slug to the shoulder would be a good start.

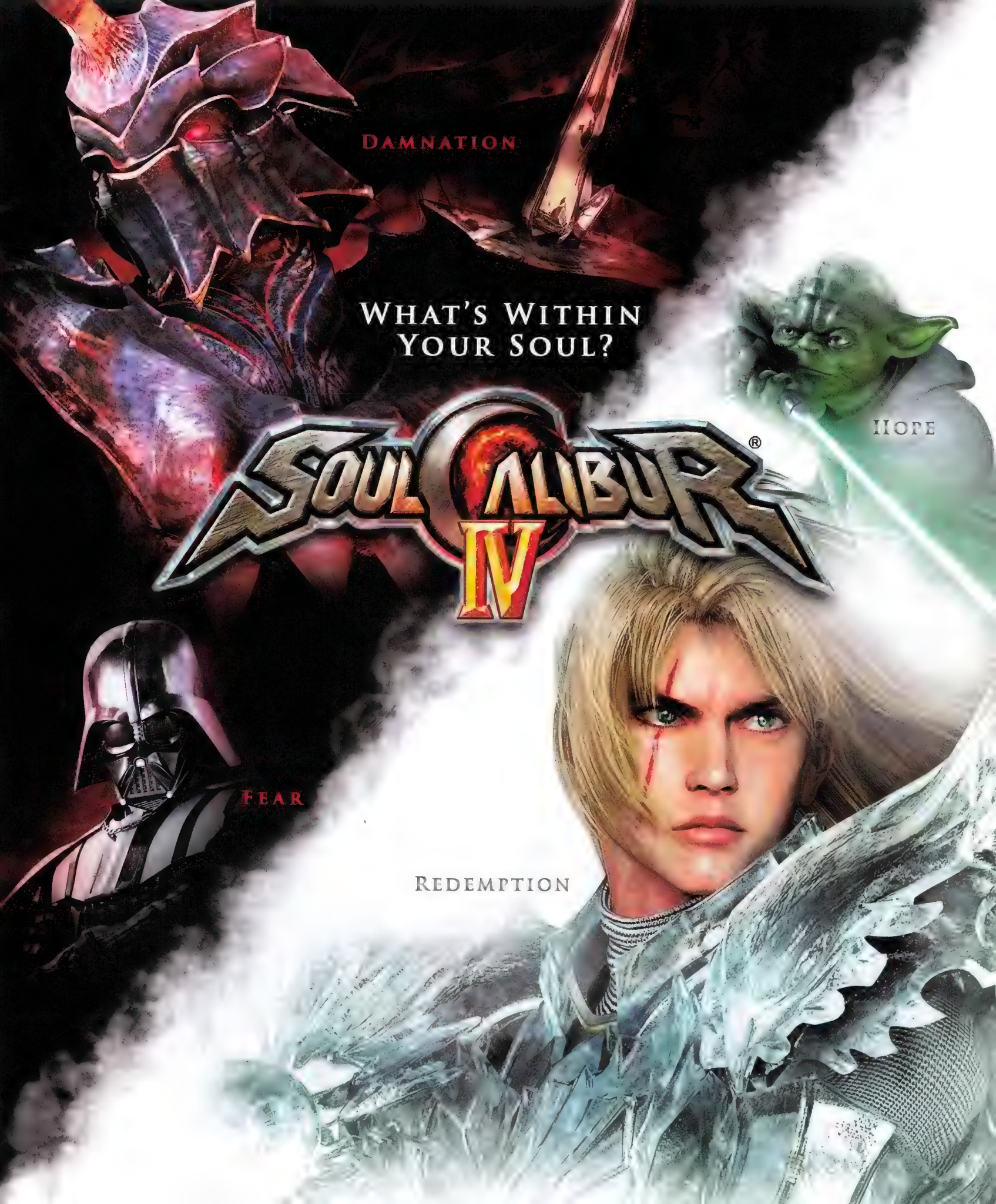
IT'S HEAVIER
Lighter isn't always better. The SIXAXIS was a featherweight, feeling kind of chintzy in our hands, and not commanding the respect a next-gen peripheral should. Thanks to the extra weight necessitated by the rumble mechanics, we can now clench our controllers with pride, and not fret about frustratingly breaking them in two when a screen-filling foe takes us out for the twelfth time.

IT'S RETROACTIVE
Many games released prior to the Dual Shock 3 are patching their games to retro-enable the force feedback feature. So, take your copy of Burnout Paradise—a title released while the rumble-less SIXAXIS still reigned supreme—for a spin, and strap in for the new vibration-fueled fun; rev your engine for a subtle controller buzz, or smack a concrete wall head-on for a more rockin' response.

McFarlane Rocks!

Now Rocking a Digital Near You

It was only a matter of time before Guitar Hero spread its wings into the loving embrace of toy retail, and there's no better way to get there than the ultimate tour bus for the hard-riving plastic rock gods that is McFarlane Toys. Coming to the stage in series 1, give it up for everyone's favorite spikey-haired punk rocker—on guitar, it's Johnny Napalm! Also on guitar, it's Axel Steel! And, er, also on guitar, it's God of Rock! And finally hailing from the KISS doughnut factory, and yes—also on guitar—give it up for Lars Ümlaut!! Woah, hang-on, where's Casey or Julie? What's with 4 dudes? Series 2 had better bring on the babes. Lars needs a cooler axe too. That one's wimpy, not to mention, purple.


DAMNATION
WHAT'S WITHIN
YOUR SOUL?
HOPE
SOULCALIBUR IV
FEAR
REDEMPTION

HOW TO PLAY *SILENT HILL 2 (PS2)*

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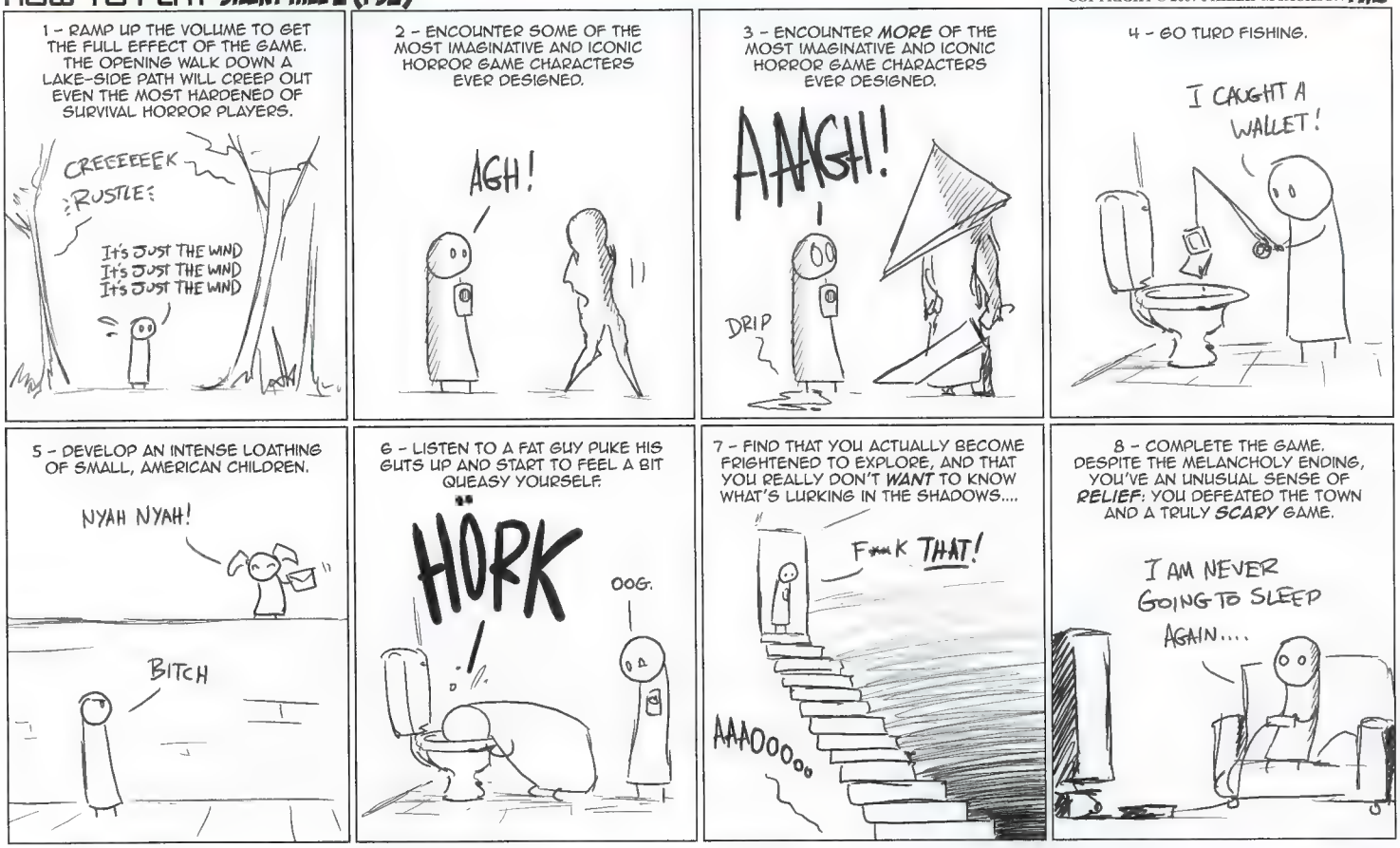

1 - RAMP UP THE VOLUME TO GET THE FULL EFFECT OF THE GAME. THE OPENING WALK DOWN A LAKE-SIDE PATH WILL CREEP OUT EVEN THE MOST HARDENED OF SURVIVAL HORROR PLAYERS.
CREEEEEEK
:RUSTLE:
It's JUST THE WIND
It's JUST THE WIND
It's JUST THE WIND
2 - ENCOUNTER SOME OF THE MOST IMAGINATIVE AND ICONIC HORROR GAME CHARACTERS EVER DESIGNED.
AGH!
3 - ENCOUNTER MORE OF THE MOST IMAGINATIVE AND ICONIC HORROR GAME CHARACTERS EVER DESIGNED.
AAAGH!
DRIP
4 - GO TURD FISHING.
I CAUGHT A WALLET!
5 - DEVELOP AN INTENSE LOATHING OF SMALL, AMERICAN CHILDREN.
NYAH NYAH!
BITCH
6 - LISTEN TO A FAT GUY PUKE HIS GUTS UP AND START TO FEEL A BIT QUEASY YOURSELF.
HORK
OOG.
7 - FIND THAT YOU ACTUALLY BECOME FRIGHTENED TO EXPLORE, AND THAT YOU REALLY DON'T WANT TO KNOW WHAT'S LURKING IN THE SHADOWS....
F**K THAT!
AAAOOOoo
8 - COMPLETE THE GAME. DESPITE THE MELANCHOLY ENDING, YOU'VE AN UNUSUAL SENSE OF RELIEF: YOU DEFEATED THE TOWN AND A TRULY SCARY GAME.
I AM NEVER GOING TO SLEEP AGAIN....

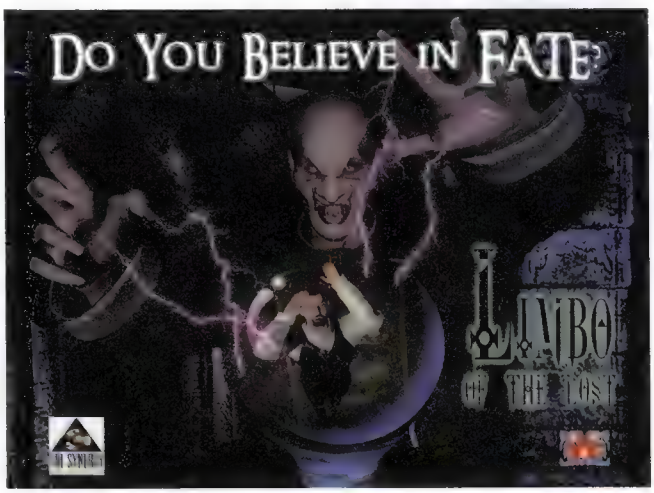
Limbo in Limbo

A [illegible]

Limbo of the Lost may very well end up being the most talked-about game of 2008; unfortunately, many of the people involved with the project probably now dread that fact. The reason? After gaming website GamePlasma noticed a strange similarity between one of Limbo's backgrounds and a location found in another PC title, Oblivion, the next few days were a flurry of other findings, as folks around the net noticed additional assets and elements that seemed lifted not only from games like Unreal Tournament, Diablo II, Thief, The Lord of the Rings: Battle for Middle-earth, and World of Warcraft, but even Hollywood films like Beetlejuice, Pirates of the Caribbean, and Spawn.

From there, Limbo of the Lost's story has continued to play out like a juicy soap opera; U.S. publisher Tri Synergy swiftly pulled the game from shelves while Marko Hautamäki, Limbo's music composer, worked quickly to distance himself from the claims of plagiarism. Even now, exactly two weeks after this crazy ordeal began, we still don't know the full story; but what a truly fascinating story it continues to be.

An extensive Wiki for the saga of Limbo of the Lost has been set up at lotl.wikia.com - it's absolutely worth a read.



playback

letters@playmagzine.com

Everything that Play magazine stands for should stand as a template for game media everywhere. I have only been a subscriber for a few months, but what I have read and seen in this magazine has given me a new hope for our gaming community. I just read So Far, So Great by Dave Halverson, and it got me fired up. Finally, someone else gets it! I am a 25 year old firefighter, veteran of the war, avid outdoors activist, and heavily invested in the struggles of this planet. I know what you are thinking (who gives a shit), but these iterations that make up my personality by default cause me to educate myself with the deep and concerning issues of my favorite hobby. It has been hard to find a magazine progressive enough to fill that order.

I am concerned that our country is on its way to making the movie *Idiocracy* a documentary. It seems more and more apparent that the USA has ADD, just look at what our culture has made mainstream and it becomes obvious. We have reality TV on every channel that equates to trisomy 21, and music that is so shallow that all it requires is a catchy chorus with a beat you can grind genitalia too at 1am at your local "hotspot." This sort of attitude has infiltrated out gaming community, and it seems that Play magazine is the only organization that gives a shit.

I will never be the type of person who opens a new game and goes straight to multiplayer. How the hell did Halo 3 ping so high on people's radars? I am going to assume no one played the campaign and are just trying to get the "stepping razor" cheevo. It saddens me that on all the people's choice game awards COD4 and Halo3 were getting higher votes over Bioshock and Orange Box. Why was this I wondered? Then I began to realize that those same people who applaud the crap over our radio and TV waves are the same people who overlook innovation and change because it's scary or different. Play magazine has shown me that they will not have the wool pulled over their eyes by hot fads and trends. I'm not a super cynical guy who looks for the downer in everything. COD4 and Halo3 are fun games, and that is what this hobby is about. However I will always favor intelligence and immersion in an epic campaign over online skirmishes with little pre-teens bigots who I hope Darwin will take care of.

Play magazine has got some balls for ditching the number score and doing reviews how I feel they should have always been done, purely subjective. You guys are not afraid of all the whiners and those who live by the motto "if I don't understand it, I am afraid of it." I ask that you please don't stop here, always be looking to take it to the next level. I am beginning to become invested in your staff's attitudes and writing style on various subjects. This is a new watershed event for me; I found a magazine I feel shares the same vision and concern for this industry and seeks to initiate intelligent discussions about them. For those of you who are nodding your head as you read this let's not just talk about, let's be about it.

Miguel Espinoza
Ventura, CA

In her review of Guitar Hero: On Tour, Heather Campbell writes, "I'm waiting for someone to figure out how to make this work on an iPod....If you could Guitar Hero through your 160-gig song library, world economies would crash."

Check out Phase, created by the same guys who orig nally brought us Guitar Hero, Harmonix Music Systems, Inc. Although the gameplay is more Frequency/Amplitude than Guitar Hero, you can play any song in your song library -- and given that, can a guitar peripheral that plugs into an iPod be far behind? The assault on world economies has already begun!

johnl
John Lanza

Wow. There are certain aspects of my job that I don't like, but for me to come out and blatantly say to my boss that I am tired of doing them, so I no longer plan to...well that is just lazy. Such is the case with your reviews. So you and your staff no longer wish to rate games by score? Sorry to hear that. It is your job. Many people, like myself, buy your magazine to see those scores. I do not mean to sound like a dick here, but the customer IS your boss. Sure, you have higher-ups to report to, but if we do not buy your magazine, you and your current "bosses" will be out of jobs.

I assume this letter will not get published in your magazine, as it does not fit with your current plans, but I just wanted to let my opinion be known.

Do not get me wrong, I did not write this letter just

"Wow. There are certain aspects of my job that I don't like, but for me to come out and blatantly say to my boss that I am tired of doing them, so I no longer plan to...well that is just lazy."

to ream...but for you to say that you are sick of scoring games... I do not subscribe to PLAY magazine, but was close to...now I plan on buying the next 2 or 3 issues, just to see what happens, as I know it takes a while for you to go to press. We shall see if the fan outpouring is big enough to keep scoring going or not. But I will tell you this: If you no longer put that little number at the end of the review, there are quite a few people who will not continue to buy your magazine. Do not disservice your fans by getting rid of scores because you no longer want to deal with coming up with them, or deal with the fan backlash. It's all part of the game. Sure, you might rate a game a nine, and later decide it was so addictive that you would count it as a ten, as is the case of Portal or PixelJunk Monsters...which is why I say this: Rate games a month late. That would get rid of the hype, and the new game smell. After playing through a game for a fair amount of time, and no longer being excited about it, rate it. What did you think of the total experience? After all was said and done? I don't mind a late review score, as long as it beats no score at all. It is maybe even more honest than an early score...

I hope this letter sees the light of day, and that it is considered. I know I would subscribe to your magazine if you changed your mind, but if not, well...thanks for the good times, Pay, and good luck.

Daniel Schwab, Fairbanks, Alaska

Developer Sound Off

Trigger Happy

words Brandon Justice

Sooo...about this whole next generation thing. We're more than 2 years into the notion that $60 is worth it, that HD will save us, and that it's OK for a game console to weigh more than a healthy child with an eating problem. Kidding. It's totally not OK. But anyways, yeah...next gen is here and rumor has it that games are at their raddest.

Or something like that. But despite the triumphant arrival of the next best thing, can anyone out there explain to me why trudging through the average action game makes me want to pimp the princess out to Bowser for that extra 10 bucks?

From what I've witnessed, it all comes down to detail. And no, I'm not talking the mind-numbing real-time physics calculation of every last strand of hair on Solid Snake's oh-so-manly mustache. I'm talking about the basics. The little things. The seemingly insignificant details that most games take for granted. Things like checkpoints, audio cues, basic behaviors for AI buddies, enemy awareness levels...the list goes on.

Commonly referred to as "triggers" in the game development community, these little bastards are simultaneously the bane of the average game designer's existence and the special sauce that butters Gabe Newell's bread. They are the all-singing, all-dancing, life-giving, mood-setting masters of all things event-driven, and they tend to define your gameplay experience as forgettable, forgivable or f**k-all awesome with a few simple lines of script.

OK, so it's more like a few thousand, but the question remains: when did the average game developer stop giving a damn about making sure the implementation of said triggers added value to the experience?

Granted, most houses tend to see diligent design work as the freakishly happy plastic clown on the top of an inexplicably ornate birthday cake, but is it too much to ask for folks to pretend to be annoyed by blatant misuse of perfectly good technology?

Take Condemned 2: Bloodshot, for example. The original was (and honestly, still is) one of my favorite next generation experiences. Fluid, intuitive and flat-out innovative in its use of sound, lighting and set design,

> "Then and only then, you'll get an idea of what a bad checkpoint can do."

Monolith crafted a game that genuinely managed to make use of their engine in a way that redefined what survival horror could be on a console.

Condemned 2, however, was the epitome of the sophomore slump. Not because the changes to the combat system were wonky (which, in many cases, they were) or because the level design failed to live up to the original (which, in many cases, it did) or even because the story continued its epic downward spiral that started just outside the final house in the original game (again... yeah). All those were at least par for the course in modern gaming....but what the hell, guys? Did anyone audit the checkpoint placement in this game? It almost seems as if a conscious decision was made to place them BEFORE each major scare.

Now, you don't need to go play Condemned 2 to understand what's wrong with this concept. Just go pop in your copy of The Descent on Blu-Ray (or any awesomely creepy movie will do). Wait for the moment where the game scares the living shit out of you, pause it, change your soiled sweatpants, then we're going to play a little game:

Repeatedly rewind the scary segment until juuuuust before the boogey man lunges for the half-naked heroine. Then press play. Try this until you no longer find that particular moment frightening. Then continue until it's slightly funny. Then continue until you start to notice the monster's make-up is loose on his left cheek. Then continue until you ask yourself why you paid money to watch a series of moving images on an over-priced box in your under-sized suburban apartment. Then and only then, you'll get an idea of what a bad checkpoint can do.

By the 5th time some bum jumps out from behind a bookshelf and knocks me down, I kinda get tired of his shtick. And the sad thing is, he's not the reason I keep revisiting this spot. It's the seven dudes in the lower room of the museum three encounters before this checkpoint that are giving me fits. So why the heck can't I clobber these clowns without the tedious task of dispatching this guy who has never managed to sack me?

Simply put, because the game forces me to. Maybe because it was too short. Maybe the idea was to give you a chance to avenge every possible death. Or maybe, just maybe, folks ran out of time. Who knows. The point is, this sort of thing should never occur in substantially funded next generation products. Too many people work too hard to see months and months of their effort thrashed by a few bad triggers.

I saw the same sort of painful placement in Turok. Endless mechanical towers with floor after floor of over-armed enemies and only one check-point at the top to break up the gun gauntlet. Awesome. Random sound triggers that note a squad-mate's uneasy gut as you enter a valley, but absolutely no reaction when an army of raptors mysteriously falls out of the sky? Personally, I hope my AI buddy lets out at least one awe-inspired expletive before he runs to the corner and fires at the ground. Speaking of which, can anyone explain to me why the enemy teammates in Haze can't hit the broad side of a neon-yellow barn? If they can't kill the scrubby enemies in the first campaign, why are they even on the mission?

But I digress. The point is, publishers spend tens of millions of dollars on these games, end up with a fairly attractive game with a full suite of developer tools that can trigger things like reactionary chatter, enemy encounters, fully functional squad-based AI and more, but at the end of the day, it's all about how they're used that separates the 10s from the "Not Again"s.

"It's not that these guys can't do it right, it's simply that they don't."

It's not that these guys can't do it right, it's simply that they don't. Further, there doesn't seem to be anyone watching out for these sort of simple mistakes. This industry needs more zealots. More watchdogs. Frankly, more Game Directors who sit on top of a product and tenaciously attack items that give games the sort of spit and polish that will drag us, kicking and screaming, into a realm where intelligent, dynamic, detail-driven experiences will replace "death-match" and "over 40 hours of gameplay!!!" as the crucial component to the average publisher's fact sheet.

I once heard a notable game director went through (and by went through, I mean unceremoniously shit-canned) several animators in an attempt to find the perfect death animation for a mid-range enemy. I've seen the animation. It's visceral and exciting and all that, but was it worth firing roughly 3-5 people to get it right? I used to think the idea absurd.

But the more I see the results of sloppy production and half-assed design direction in major console titles, I have to start wondering if Jack Handy had it right. He stated, "Instead of trying to build newer and bigger weapons of destruction, mankind should be thinking about getting more use out of the weapons we already have."

Just sayin'.

Brandon Justice is a trigger-happy, Monkey-drinking no-money bum for the fine folks at Play Hard Sports. Feel free to e-mail thoughts on your least favorite action game moments to bjustice@playhard.net.

Living Death

What killed the arcade...and what is digging it up?

The formative representation of interactive entertainment—amusement (fondly known as arcade gaming)—has seen a cataclysmic decline, both in audience and media perception. Many have carved the tombstone for the sector, while others have pointed the finger at home gaming as the wielder of the murder weapon. But what is the reality of the state of video amusement, and from a meteoric decline, can there ever be a resurgence?

words Kevin Williams

History

One of the keys debated in the death (or assignation) of the video amusement machine is the birth of the console platform. However, there needs to be some clarification: Home game platforms—known colloquially as consoles—originated some years before the establishment of video amusement. It has been revealed that Ralph Baer's legendary Brown Box (aka Odyssey) TV concept game Ping-Pong was copied by Atari to create the coin-op smash Pong, which went on to publicize arcade gaming beyond its mechanical roots. Atari would later buy a sub-license and pay royalties in lieu of damage to avoid legal action.

Though this shows that console beat arcade to the punch, it was still arcade that built momentum. But what we mean by "console killed arcade" is that once established, console stole the clothes, ideas and capability of arcade and left it for dead—even going so far as to attempt to discredit amusement when arcade games were converted for play on home systems.

This transition in player loyalty is best explained by the birth and death of the Sega Saturn. By 1994, Sega's empire had developed a considerable lead in presenting the latest 3-D CGI. Arcade games such as Virtua Fighter, Virtua Cop and Virtua Racing had become benchmark titles; Sega had increased the capability of their Model 1 hardware and achieved a near realism in onscreen graphics with the first texture-mapped driver, Daytona USA, on the Model 2.

Sega achieved graphical supremacy by licensing military simulator hardware and redeveloping it for amusement. Martin Marietta (later to be merged into Lockheed Martin), at the time synonymous with tank, helicopter and fighter-jet graphical simulation, worked with Sega's legendary AM4 to build the Model 2. The military contractor hoped to beat their swords into plough shears, while the arcade giant needed to leapfrog slow home-grown CGI hardware for licensed cutting-edge technology.

This was not the first time that coin-op and military simulation had converged—in 1980, Atari had been approached to develop a military variant of their revolutionary tank game Battlezone. This prototype would go on to become the "Bradley Tank Trainer"—treated as a myth until an original chip set was salvaged by the MAME (Multi-Arcade Machine Emulator). Now players are able to experience Battlezone, the military combat simulator hybrid once on the U.S. Army's secret list.

The need to keep the most advanced hardware for amusement was countered by the hunger and profitability of the emerging home-gaming scene. After the 1984 collapse, a resurgence in home gaming fed off the success and gained momentum of amusement licenses. The opportunity proved tantalizing and led to attempts to create an authentic arcade-to-home route.

One of the most ambitious was the Neo-Geo format in 1990. Leading amusement factory SNK created a revolutionary 2-D infrastructure, using powerful cartridges to deliver the MVS (multi-video system) game experiences. The rich color and fast action led the way in the market dominated by the Japanese Amusement Machine Manufacturers' Association (JAMMA). But SNK had large aspirations: They envisaged the Neo-Geo literally as a new world in amusement; the brand was to encompass an arcade machine, facility operation...and a home game system.

The original concept was that players would be able to play on the MVS at their local arcade, store their place in the game on a unique memory card, go to the pizza counter, order a meal and at the same time rent a Neo-Geo AES (Advance Entertainment System) that ran exactly the same authentic games on a stripped-down, TV-compatible home system. Because of the system's authentic controls, arcade circuit board and a level of quality never seen before in a home system, the SNK board could only envisage players renting the famously expensive system. But they would be proven wrong!

The hunger for authentic arcade gaming drove actual sales of the machine, and though never a top ten in console sales, it holds a special place in many players' hearts: Authentic systems and cartridges are sold for close to original sales numbers, while the Neo-Geo AVS joystick pad is still built to this day and is the controller of choice for fighting games, even on the latest next-gen consoles.

For arcade, the need for a crossover was achieved with the Sony PlayStation. The powerful but cost-effective CGI that was capable with the PS chip set allowed for a unique agreement between Namco and Sony. The arcade manufacturer developed a derivative arcade-only version of the architecture, known as the System 22 architecture, which launched in 1993.

The cheap but powerful CGI allowed Namco to launch their über-driver Ridge Racer that year, which enabled Sony to have a near perfect arcade conversion on their hardware when they launched the PlayStation console the following year. Namco would go on to refine the chip set to release the System 11 hardware in 1994, and would bring the brawler masterpiece Tekken to the arcade and home, superseding the Sega Saturn.

The dream was now broken; amusement found that its compelling technology was able to be simulated at home.

Present

We also have to remember that the amusement business comprises both the operation as well as the manufacture of machines. Sega, Namco and Taito are still to this day major venue operators—vast arcade business profits direct from the cashbox.

The international amusement scene has been more

"Martin Marietta (later to be merged into Lockheed Martin), at the time synonymous with tank, helicopter and fighter-jet graphical simulation, worked with Sega's legendary AM4 to build the Model 2."

"The modern amusement operation scene is now a complicated environment...arcades cannot be stand-alone establishments outside of Japan."

complicated. Initially in the '80s, independent sites—what we all commonly call arcades—were the order of the day, their unique blend of technology game mecca and social gathering point proved a heady mix, formative in shaping the lives of many youth and carving itself in popular culture. But after the downturn of such venues in the '90s, owners depleted the market. Once popular sites became dirty, dangerous and antisocial establishments, as operators squeezed the last profits out of them without reinvesting in those players that had made them rich.

The modern amusement operation scene is now a complicated environment—internationally, amusement is still a highly valuable business, though arcades cannot be stand-alone establishments outside of Japan. The Asian market has continued their love affair with amusement, building on the social element supported by the latest broadband tournament infrastructures.

In the new book *Arcade Mania!*, veteran SNK executive Soichiro Hosoya reveals why arcade is still vitally important to the company: "We have to release our fighting games in arcades first, if we didn't, nobody would buy the console games!"

Outside of Asia, amusement has been relegated to a component of the out-of-home entertainment sector. The cinema, bowling and hospitality sectors all employ vast amusement installations, though they favor machines that offer a more deluxe attraction than the conventional arcade-piece layout.

The chances of the arcade scene regaining visibility seem slim. For many, the genre is dead and buried, and despite the continued release of arcade games, their opinion is fixed.

This is best illustrated by Capcom's launch of the latest installment of the Street Fighter mega-franchise. When Street Fighter IV was previewed at an arcade show in Japan in February, players waited in line for over an hour and a half to get their hands on it. The North American and European amusement trade, however, were loath to even consider exporting an expensive high-definition, Asian-styled fighting cabinet into a market they deemed depressed, and so they ignored the game's release.

At this point, after years of neglect and mismanagement, the worm has turned. The loyal (if not fanatical) arcade player base has turned on the trade and taken control: Sparse arcade operations where the hardcore coin-op players used to hang out have been preempted. And we now see venues buying Asian game direct, avoiding the outdated local trade representatives.

In some cases, the players have gone one step furthe and created their own venues. In France, there is the La Mythik: Versus Fighting Club, a site populated with the latest Japanese brawler titles in a venue run by players for players. The audience is supplying for themselves what the trade has become unable to supply; the social element of the amusement gaming experience is hard to kill.

This disillusion with the official trade comes from an overwhelming feeling of sterility associated with traditional arcade representatives in international climes. Where Asian amusement has embraced broadband, magnetic and IC smart cards and next-gen applications, U.S. and European operators and satellite distribution arms of leading coin-op factories have dragged their fee or totally rejected the adoption of similar applications.

One of the best examples of this reluctance to embrace new opportunities has been seen in prize tournament gaming. The popularity of league and tournament play has driven Asian gaming to embrace connectivity. The Sega and Namco Japanese ALL.net (Amusement Linkage Live Network) have allowed profitable repeat play and tournament gaming of big releases such as Tekken and Virtua Fighter, as well as driving and shooting titles. Other manufacturers such as leading corporation Konami and the e-Amusement network have defined the 21st century arcade player experience with a platform to save play data, battle online in head-to-head matches and support nationwide ranking.

The latest developments see players subscribing to special 3G mobile phone networks that allow them to check rankings, customize their characters, and even challenge other players to a game. These systems use online and Qcode support to share the players' statistica data. Developments in Japan have gone one step furthe with players able to pay for their game through their mobile phones.

Though the league and tournament element of amusement in America and Europe has been mainly underground, it has contributed to amusement's continued survival. The beat mania genre originated by Konami's Dance Dance Revolution and continued by Andamiro and their Pump It Up music-video game series has seen vast gaming competition blossom. The World Pump Festival (WPF) has grown since first started the professional player competition now offers up to $148,000 in prize money.

The trendsetting social element of amusement has always been fundamental, but with a growth in the socia networking aspirations of today's audience, fueled by the Web 2.0 revolution, out-of-home entertainment has evolved. The establishment of new trends has also seen amusement pave the way for physicality in the gaming experience.

Long before Nintendo had even decided to build a new game platform, Konami, known for pushing the boundaries of the gaming experience, developed their motion capture (mocap) technology in 2001. With this they created a body-tracking gun game (Police 24/7) and then the innovative Mocap Boxing and Tsurugi: The Sword. Players' movements interfaced directly with the game. Long before the Wii was a twinkle in Nintendo's

THE GODHAND
I'M MAO, THE NO.1 HONOR STUDENT.
AS AN HONOR STUDENT, I DON'T WASH MY HAND AFTER USING THE RESTROOM!
COOL!
DOOD!
WOW!
IN FACT, I NEVER WASH MY HAND.
MUHA HA HA!
YOU'RE NO.1!
YOU'RE THE BEST DOOD!
CAN I TAKE A PICTURE WITH YOU, DOOD?
I WANT ONE TOO, DOOD!
I GOTTA GET YOUR AUTOGRAPH, DOOD!
NO THANKS DOOD...
WE WILL NOW COMMENCE WITH THE HAND SHAKING.

eye, Konami, and then Namco with Maza: Flash of the Blade, proved the drawing power of mocap; Konami even going as far to create an exercise mocap game, Martial Beat.

Amusement continues to define exclusive products to validate its existence, fulfilling the need for unachievable at-home experiences beyond the best 3-D graphics, or the most compelling competitive arena. Amusement is also striving toward total immersion; the development of game platforms that talk directly to the senses of the player, immersing them within a gaming environment.

This has been seen with the 2001 ORBS (Over Reality Booster System) from Namco Bandai that evolved into the Banpresto Gundam Panoramic Optical Display system—special surround sound video display and audio in a capsule enclosure. While visually surrounding the modern gamer, amusement has moved toward shaking players to their very core. Motion simulator platforms in the arcade scene, like the Sega R-360, offer a compelling experience far from the realistic military alternative. Modern developments still go for a unique ride, but beyond

the conventional confines of a deluxe cabinet.

Sega has worked with Korean SimuLine to develop the CyCraft arcade simulator, while American-based Global VR and Tsunami have created highly effective arcade motion platforms for their converted driving-game series NASCAR Racing. New development will lead to the creation of hybrid special attractions, amusement mixed with the concentration of the theme park attraction. Sega has launched both The House of the Dead 4 Special and Let's Go Jungle Special—twin-seat shooting experiences that rotate the players between two large screens in an enclosed theater cabinet, more attraction than arcade game.

What remains for amusement is evolution, the dabbling of the latest graphical, display and motion technologies into delivery systems that support intensive tournament competition. While the console sector looks toward casual gaming, amusement defined the genre years before, and with the direct contact with the cashbox, the hope is that the transient player base will find a new home back with arcades.

From the living room to the arcade

Porting consumer games into the amusement area is still a strong incentive for many leading manufacturers. A surprising number of games get a second life in the arcade sector:

Global VR

The American amusement developer has established a long-term relationship with console amusement crossover. EA Sports most recently took to the arcades with NASCAR Racing—more than just a port, the game has been totally redeveloped based on the original core to suit the graphical and playing requirements of amusement. Global VR continued to borrow on EA's driving gold, sending Need for Speed Carbon into arcades.

Other consumer game titles have lent themselves to amusement adaptation. Inspired by UbiSoft's Far Cry, GVR launched Paradise Lost, bringing two-player machine-gun action to the genre. But not everything is guns and driving: UbiSoft's innovative World War II air combat game has also been given the arcade treatment with an impressive fighter cockpit installment for Blazing Angel.

Taito

Amusement factories have been highly prized in recent acquisitions in Japan—one example is the merger of Square Enix with Taito. From this, crossover branding is expected to flourish. Some unusual experimentation has been attempted across the genre. A specially licensed version of Valve's first-person shooter Half Life 2: Survivor takes the intense gun action one step further with a unique cabinet and controls, enhanced with real-time online matches using the Taito's own arcade network technology (NESYS), which supports smart card storage.

Square Enix's ability to access arcades through the

merger with Taito was exemplified by a number of Final Fantasy cross-platform releases into amusement. The most recently launched Lord of Vermilion offered a card-collecting RPG experience, mixing touch-screen and card recognition with and full networkability between venues via NESYS.

Namco Bandai

Namco Bandai is another major Japanese amusement factory that turned to a consumer software developer for a first-person shooter suitable for amusement application. They produced Valve's other major blasting success, Counter Strike NEO. However, this game was developed for the Namco LEDZone LAN site terminal gaming scene that Namco has cultivated as an offshoot of their more traditional amusement venue operation.

Namco has also established a long-term relationship with Nintendo—the console powerhouse has always kept a toe in the amusement scene that gave them such success. Most recently Namco worked with the original console team to create Mario Kart Arcade GP, a four-player network version that includes smart card storage features.

Sega

For the larger amusement corporations, the ability to call from their own consumer development resource has proven profitable. The internal development studios of Sega Racing and RazorWorks have produced compelling arcade representations of their PC originals. With Ford Racing: Full Blown and most recently with Sega Rally 3—based on Sega Rally REVO—the company has developed a more cost-effective route for the changed conditions of the European and American amusement scene.

...the rest

Smaller amusement houses have also turned to consumer content to supply ready-made and proven content. The Korean arcade motion simulator company IMOtion licensed JoWooD's World War II tank blaster to create Panzer Elite Action on their iGO simulator. More traditional amusement development has been seen from Namco's sister developer Banpresto, who took Gamewax's cartoon racer and gave it the arcade touch with Wacky Races.

A number of illegal arcade cabinets, with console machines housed inside to play popular games, have appeared as the amusement market slows in available cheap new releases. Though intellectual lawyers work hard to close down these infringements, there have been growing rumors that either Microsoft or another console manufacturer will license a specific amusement cabinet version, targeting the casual retail, hotel and truck-stop player base.

Kevin Williams is founder and director of the out-of-home interactive entertainment consultancy KWP Limited (thestingerreport.com/kwp.html). His extensive years in the global video amusement and high-tech attractions industry include top management and design posts, with special focus on new technology development and applications. A well-known speaker and writer on the industry and its technology, he is also the editor and publisher of The Stinger Report, a leading industry e-newsletter (free to subscribers) and web-based information service (thestingerreport.com).

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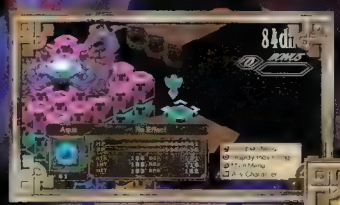

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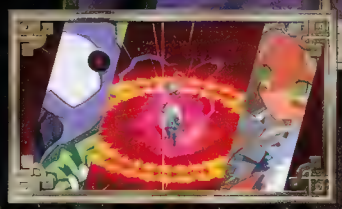

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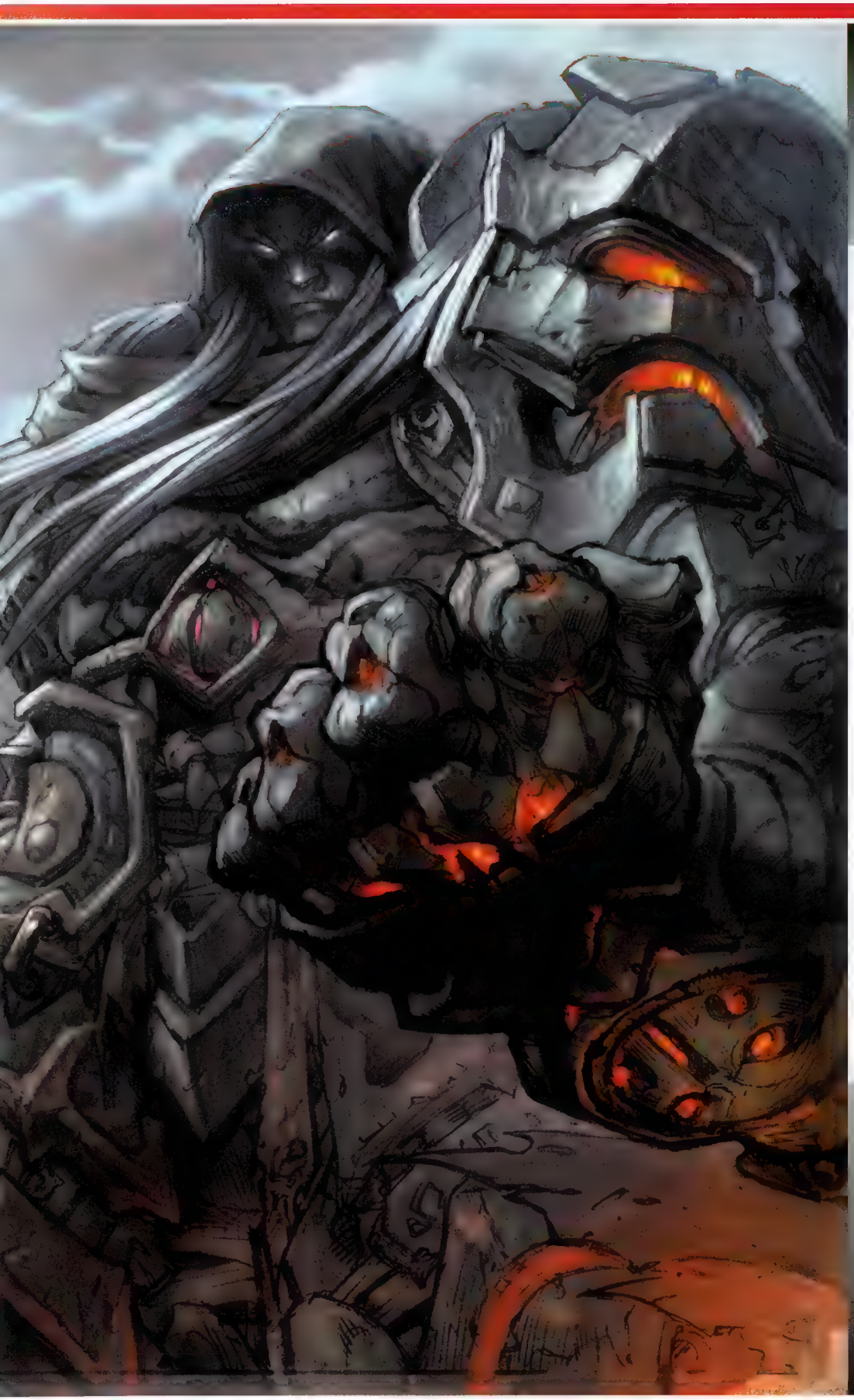
DARKSIDERS

Embrace the dark side

words Brady Fiechter



We need more stylized games coming out again, man. Take it back!"

Renowned comic book artist Joe Madureira of *X-Men* and *Battle Chasers* fame is about to start a revolution, but before the march begins, his work as creative director on Darksiders: Wrath of War is really just getting started. "Dude, I'm just gonna stop saying this is broken and let you play. It's just that we're so hard on ourselves," says Madureira, as I sneak well past the point I was supposed to be allowed to experience, witnessing the framework of a scene that...

No spoilers here, especially when what I've seen concerns one of the coolest ideas you'll find in a game this year. Games like this don't get made that often, and I'm with Madureira: It's time to take it back. "I like game characters that look like game characters. The games that got me into games are Mario, Zelda, crazy Japanese Genesis games. It's all art: Metal Slug. Shinobi. Double Dragon. It's all great, come on! Whatever happened to fantasy in games?"

The definitive answer is not today's concern; what is of concern is that Darksiders is being made with a very specific philosophy in mind: The team loves games like Castlevania, Metroid, ICO, Zelda—games where a richness of dreamlike imagination have no care for the modern world and its militaristic dominance. Darksiders is as art-driven and fantastical as they come, where demons and angels wage war, where the main character is one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, ominously known as War. Where evil bat queens devour the bat you ride in on, where disgusting monsters that look like blobs of rotting flesh with cages embedded in their bodies strive to crush you with a giant fist.

"We basically wanted to make a fantasy game," says studio head David Adams. "You can see what we're influenced by. That's a big thing for us: With Darksiders, we wanted a game like what we used to love playing. We

"Whatever happened to fantasy in games?"

Joe Madureira, creative director

"Having a hollowed-out library with a demonic prison in the center of it, though, is pretty sweet." Madureira

wanted it to be a complete fantasy world. That enhances the exploration aspects. If it's realism, there's just no exploration in a real city. With us, it has to be rooted in earth—it *is* the apocalypse—but pretty much the second you get around the corner, you don't want it to be earth anymore. We want it to feel like a fantasy world. I just can't get attached to these real worlds."

Game theory is such a nebulous study. There are plenty of developers who are very adamant about the idea that you cannot relate to a world and its inhabitants unless there are plenty of modern signposts leading the way. This is simply obtuse thinking, a shortsighted way of reaching for a very rigid demographic, and I will second Adam's words: I just can't get attached to these real worlds. At least not in the way I most desire from a game.

"You could come around the corner and see, like, a parking garage or a hospital, you're not going to be, *duh duh duh*." [Madureira makes the universal sound for "This is so amazing!"]

"Yeah, there's not that moment of, 'Oh my gosh, look at that hospital, it's just so amazing,'" agrees Adams.

"Having a hollowed-out library with a demonic prison in the center of it, though, is pretty sweet," says Madureira. "And honestly, from a story point of view, too, when you're creating a new fantasy world, you need all that nerdy fantasy history. It's like, 'in the ninth age of King Leonidas, the Argonian...' whatever. You kind of need to have that. But when you set it on earth, all of a sudden you've just saved yourself hours of cut-scenes and dialogue. It's like, earth, I get, it's been taken over by demons, I get it. You can move forward from that point."

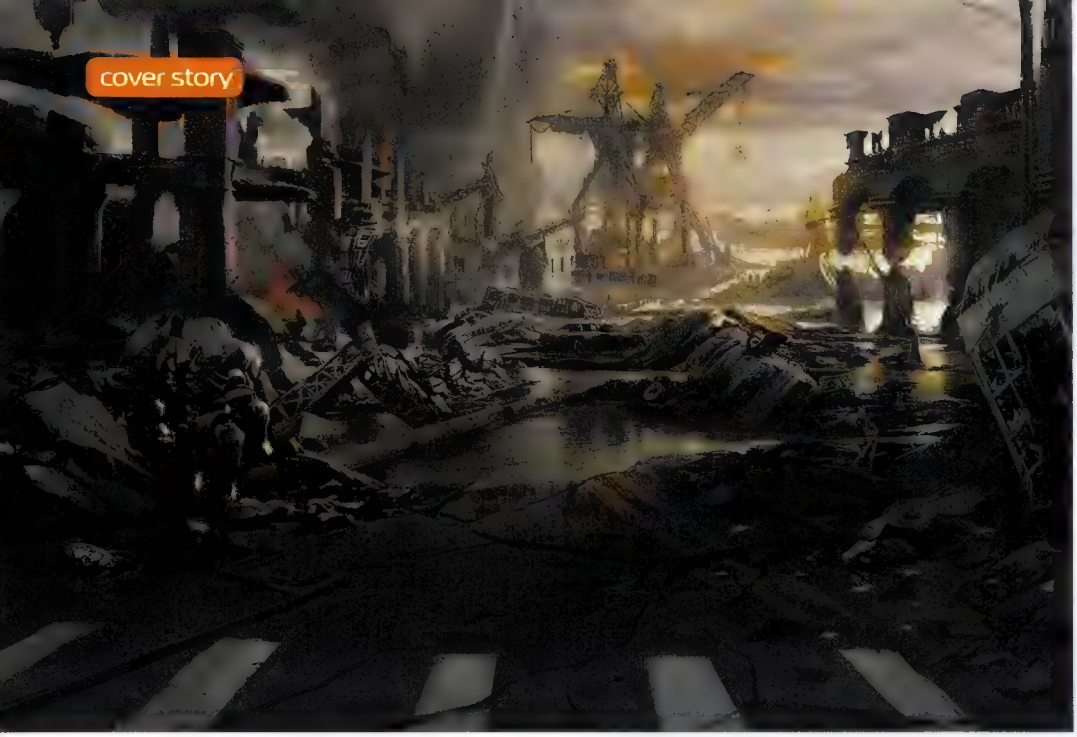
Earth in Darksiders is not filled with pretty flowers smiling at a pretty blue sky. This is the apocalypse, the kind you heard about in the Bible. Sort of. "It's the comic book version of the apocalypse. If the horsemen were on the X-Men," says Madureira, "that's how it would be. It's not really horror, it's very fantasy adventure."

"We're pretty low-key on the religious side," adds Adams.

Controversy will not be joining this Darksiders revolution for its fanatical button-pushing (that gut-spilling, cross-shaped wound on the snake boss notwithstanding), but do expect a healthy M rating when the limbs of a various assortment of demonic freaks are removed in a theatrical display of chunks and blood. War carries a big sword—and he loves to use it. The sword (and a few other similar weapons to be revealed later) will always be your primary weapon, slicing and dicing by the command of a few central combos. "We have the weapon variety without the complexity," explains Adams. "You always have your main weapon, no matter what, through the entire game; you can just use the secondary weapon as relevant. A lot of games, you get a new weapon, and you kind of go, 'eh,' and you just go back to your regular weapon. But they're all essential in their own way here; they also serve a puzzle mechanic. Like a gauntlet allows you to get through certain types of barriers. It gives you enormous strength. You can pick up buses, subway cars. It blocks heavy armors. With a death scythe, there are certain creatures that can't be killed without it; you harvest more souls with it. And you can have two weapons at a time. You can combo between them."

A selection of three permanent guns also come into play as secondary items, either demonic, angelic or human; occasionally you'll come across a transient pickup as well, but once expended, it's back to your central inventory of weapons. There's a ton of stuff for the aggressive explorer to find.

The majority of my time spent with Darksiders' combat introduces me to the general use of the sword, and I find that it feels right merely swinging through a crowd with a simple command or two. The game, I am told, will invite you to master your battery of techniques, but what if I find satisfaction in simplicity?



"We started to get the God of War and Devil May Cry comparisons, and we were

"I actually enjoy the combat so much in Zelda, with what, three moves, and I honestly like it more than Ninja Gaiden," Adams explains. "I put God of War a bit closer to us, but we're not making Ninja Gaiden, or Devil May Cry. I certainly like those games..."

"I'll say this, Ninja Gaiden, in like a five-minute session, it feels so fluid, it feels better than Zelda. But after like six hours, I just putter out.," says Madureira.

"That is one important distinction," says Adams. "It's not our intention that you have to be a hardcore action player. We want some depth of combat there, because if you want to get into it that way...it's just never going to be a Ninja Gaiden, that wasn't our intention. Sometimes our combat is even a little more puzzley. It's more about figuring out how to kill the guy."

There is a lot of talk throughout this look into Darksiders about Zelda, with one idea after another looping back to reflections on Link's storied adventures. "When we started the game, pretty much our soul inspiration was Zelda, a little bit of Prince of Persia," says Adams.

"I always thought Castlevania and Zelda," Madureira jumps in. "You always get that question: What's the hook? We do have the horse, we do have the open level structure and exploration, we have the cinematic combat. It's just its own experience. It's not like, oooh, you play at night, and there's this crazy sensor..."

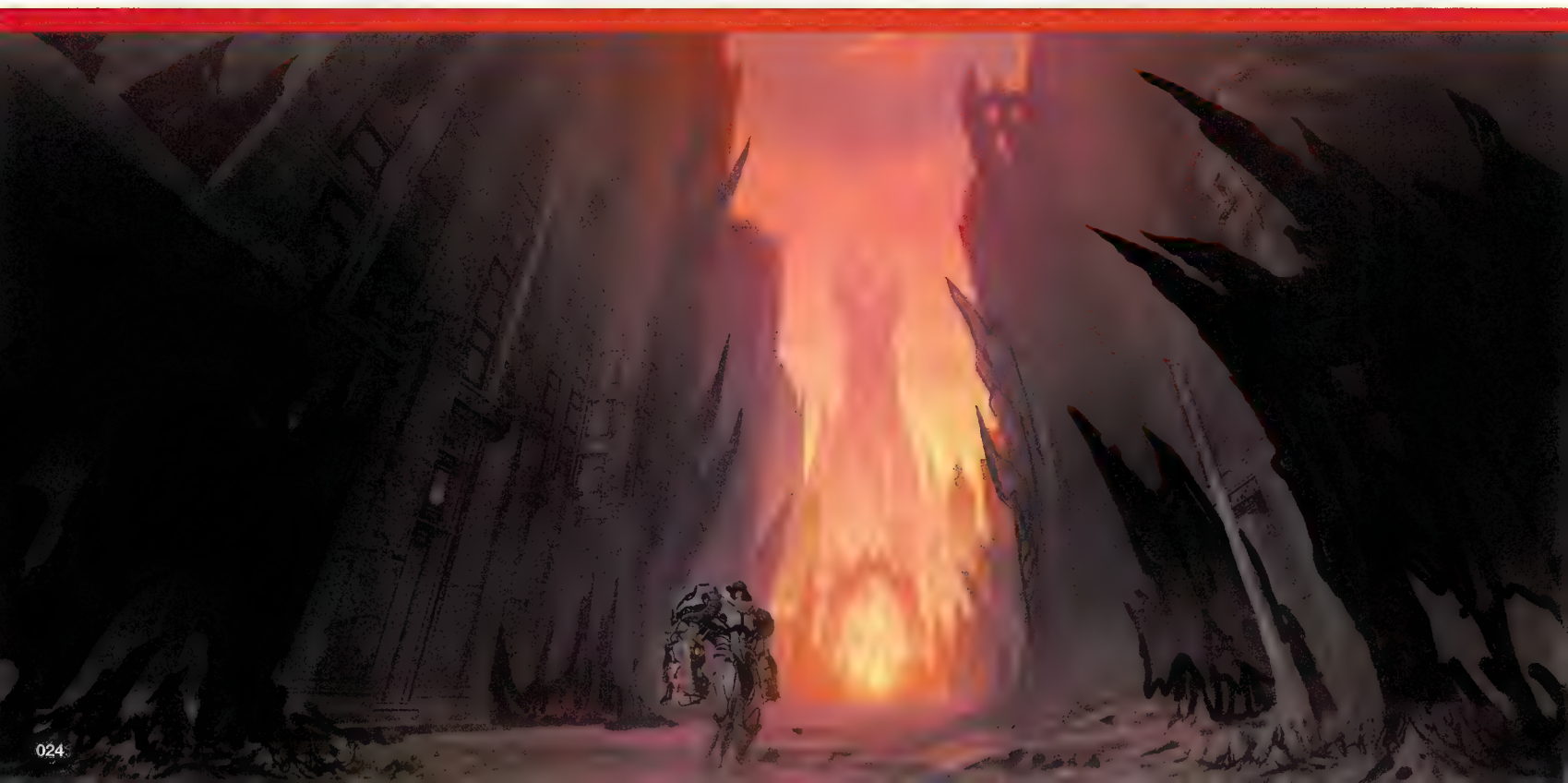
"It's funny," adds Adams, "when we first started showing the game, War is one of the horsemen of the apocalypse, naturally he's going to be badass. We started to get the God of War and Devil May Cry comparisons, and we were like, really? But then we were like, yeah, I guess from what we showed, that kind of makes sense. But those were never our inspiration."

Having a friendly alignment with God of War isn't such a bad thing, but spend time with Darksiders and you begin to see the diverging visions. "This Zelda talk has to be more talk than show, because, well, think of the depth we're talking," explains Adams.

"It's tough. The linear, cinematic combat stuff just shows better," adds Madureira. "If you were to show a big open Zelda-type level, where you get lost eight times to figure it out...You have to be in your living room, having played the game for a while."

And it is here where you begin to see Darksiders take compelling form, as War begins uncovering a lava dungeon, bringing to bear the bold description of a Zelda for adults. This is an oppressive, treacherous place of bubbling fire and brimstone, of rising pillars and fleshy pod sacks that stick in the cracks and grow on the walls. Eerie green candles bring light to the inner keeps. As you navigate the halls, opening locked doors and searching for swords that act as keys, the puzzle aspects begin to grow more complex along the way. Eventually you discover the dungeon's core prize, a special item that will stay with you for the remainder of the journey and allow final passage through this particular challenge. The lava dungeon offers you a crossblade, a boomerang of sorts that can be used as a retrieval device, to lock onto multiple targets and to transfer elements like fire to ignite the pods and find further passage.

Every dungeon will house one piece of gear, such as the ability to slow time, and can be linked together for attacks. Because War has been stripped of his powers ("Think Alucard in Castlevania," laughs Madureira), you'll be slowly amassing more strength and ability, finding new items, expanding paths that further emphasize the exploration. "We didn't want to set up any artificial barriers. There's always a logical barrier, like a big gap, sand, whatever," explains Adams. "It's important that you can go places first and see them. It's kind of like a teaser. It just gives you more sense that you're in the world.



Instead of having a rock wall that mysteriously disappears after level three, here it's like, yeah, there's a creature in the sand, there's a physical reason why you can't go there. Once you get an item, you can go back."

War is an agile warrior, shimmying along ledges, casting hook lines, leaping across platforms, doing everything an active videogame adventurer is born to do. Which means double jumping. "A super jump is cool. But it's cooler if there were some jumps you couldn't make along the way, then you get it," Adams points out. "Usually, we try to keep it pretty iconic, too. We wanted to get it in your head, 'Oh yeah, I get to go here, here and here now.' You start to mentally unlock areas as you go along. We want you to be excited about moving through our world, not just fighting in it."

Not all embellishments are earned through discovery; sometimes you have to buy to survive. Every kill yields a soul, which is the world's acting currency and does wonders when handed over to the Merchant, who in return will hand you a multitude of items and enhancements, fill out your weapon slots—add damage, change the attribute—and hook you up with better armor. The Merchant provides a key component to the desire to flesh out War with the game's continual sense of role-playing progression.

But perhaps there is a price for this big business. "You're not quite sure what he's going to actually do with these souls, you don't feel that good about it," explains Madureira. "You don't trust this guy, you just don't trust him."

You'll come across a lot of characters in the game who may turn out to be the scum of this earth, but you'll need them to survive in some way or another. The Smith, for instance, carves out additional slots for your weapons and assembles devices you will eventually need to solve puzzles and open gateways. Most characters you come in contact with will stay more in the background, but the Smith will at one point join you in battle.

Early on War may be indebted to the people he sees, but he is inevitably walking a path toward omnipotence. "We wanted a really strong sense of growth," says Adams. "In a lot of games, you get more combos or whatever, but you don't really feel any more powerful. Through the weapons upgrades, the abilities, the horse, we wanted you to feel like you were actually getting more powerful, your character is really expanding."

"We have a ton of mid-bosses. We just love bosses, we can't help it." Madureira

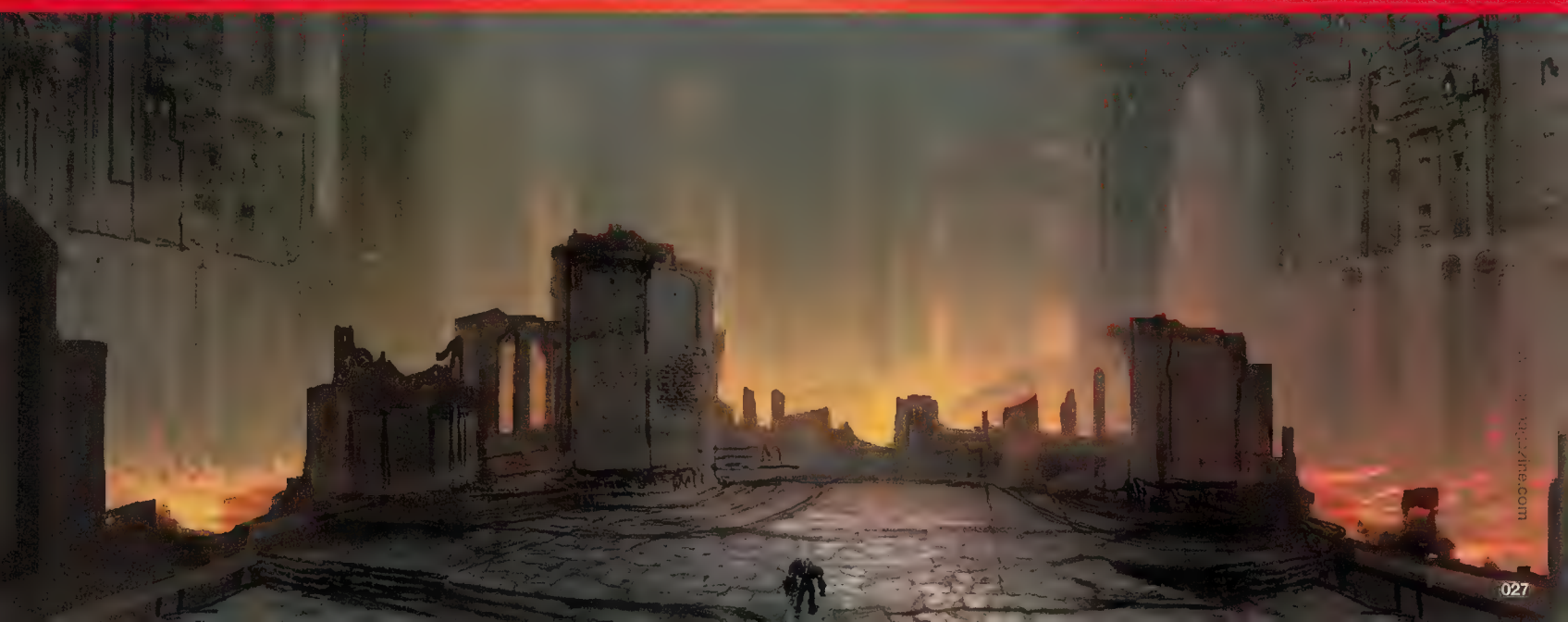
If the world is to expand and reveal its own story, so should the character as its axis of discovery. War is being set up as a morally ambiguous character in some ways; he is larger than life, yet he struggles for his own life to continue. "Basically he's framed for his involvement in the destruction of earth, when it wasn't sanctioned, it wasn't time yet," explains Madureira. "He's given the chance to come back to earth and prove his innocence or die. Earth is infested with demons at this point. Basically while he's doing this he has to uncover what's happened to the other four horsemen, get his powers back, and destroy the main bad guy, actually called the Destroyer. He uncovers a plot between heaven, hell and the Destroyer."

If sliding your trusty sword through the heart of the Destroyer is the final ending to Darksiders, are we to expect some other boss encounters along the way?

"We have a ton of mid-bosses. We just love bosses, we can't help it," answers Madureira. Some boss encounters, like that with the Bat Queen, will intermittently unfold as War marches through a dungeon, establishing an anticipation and cinematic wonder for the scene. Other bosses will lie quietly in the shadows, like the vortex entity who guards a well of souls in the underworld.

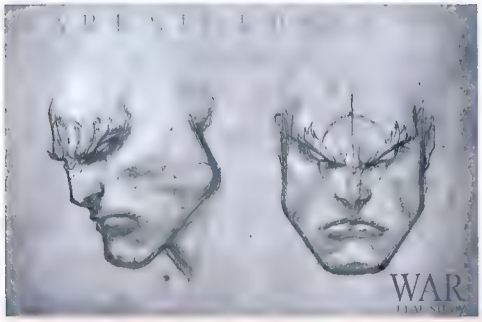
A guy like War, accused by a counsel of mediators between heaven and hell of obliterating God's handiwork, kind of needs a babysitter, so when he is sent back to earth, a watcher is commanded to keep an eye on him. "If you stray from your mission or whatever, he can just kill you," says Madureira. "He's kind of shackled to you, you can't get rid of him. He's just dying to kill you at the first chance he gets. Hopefully you'll build up some hatred for this guy, despite his aid. War encounters guys like this throughout the game, where he has to interact with unsavory characters to accomplish his mission."

Early on, you'll also be introduced to a companion named Ruin, a supernatural horse that can be summoned at the touch of a button. Mounting and dismounting Ruin at just the right moment can beef up an attack scheme, sending the horse on a killer stampede while you do some cleanup on the side. Even in this early stage of



development, Ruin controls impressively well—a pretty tall order when you think of how many games tend to get this awkwardly wrong. "Exactly," says Madureira. "Even from the beginning we thought, 'Maybe we should do the horse in the sequel.' We've played so many games where it wasn't quite, it just didn't feel that good. We did it first just to prove that we could or we couldn't, and it felt pretty good early on. So we were like, sweet, it's in. Then we just worked to polish it."

Ruin only comes out to play in the overworld, through which you'll routinely pass on the way to meet allies and find additional goods while en route to the next dungeon. Most of the game takes place in these dungeons, which by name alone might lead you to believe they're all underground mazes that harken back to a crawling, labyrinthine quest of yore. They'd be better described as, say, major arteries that reach out, pumping lifeblood into the game's complete expression of mood and mechanics. War will enter a church, explore the ashlands, ascend a demonic tower, find passage through a twisted web of steel that looks like a giant spider cocoon.



"There's real reward for exploration, you get to go to a new area. It's not just going to a different part of town," says Adams.

The game opens with the moment the apocalypse descends upon earth, before you're called in front of the counsel. "That was really important to us," emphasizes Adams. "No one ever lets you actually play the moment of the apocalypse. It's the actual scene we're creating, guys will be in the bus screaming for their lives, everything. Chaos."

"We purposely avoided doing that sequence first," says Madureira. "It had to be completely awesome, and we were getting better as we went."

This is not a scene that will be revealed anytime soon, but its discussion leads to a curious topic: getting all this contrasting level design in a massive-scale world of Zelda-sized proportions is next-generation ball-busting. "At first, we just didn't think we could get all this detail in," admits Madureira. "It's so hard making a next-gen game. We really had to learn to be efficient and make all this work. Things are getting easier and faster."

Castlevania: Symphony of the Night is a good reference of study for the idea of atmospheric separation—and plenty of fodder for Madureira: "Zelda is second only to Castlevania. I'm a 2-D whore. I can play 2-D games for the rest of my life."

Every wing of the Castlevania castle carries some distinct theme, where dramatic shifts in art, color and space heighten the immersion. One second you are in a library, the next you are in an open chamber, climbing into a clock tower.

"Now that I think about it," begins Madureira, "those 2-D games, there are a lot of conventions, just from an inspiration standpoint, that influence us and stay with us. I still remember when I played Gunstar Heroes on Genesis. Treasure would just do things like have three bosses in a row, or four minibosses. What? There's supposed to be one miniboss and one boss, what's going on here, this is crazy? Stuff like that has kind of stuck with us, we're kind of doing the same thing, breaking the conventional structure of some of the levels, stuff like that."

Listening to a developer talk about the old school with such conviction is music to my ears, and a tune that isn't played that much these days. How important it is to see the bigger picture, whose beauty is often elusive. "One thing I feel playing Zelda, and you don't feel this a lot in most games, it's like you can feel the developer smiling down on you," says Madureira. "You know Miyamoto's all, 'You like that shit, don't you? We knew you were going to be back here and find this.' You just feel like they thought of everything. We want that feeling."

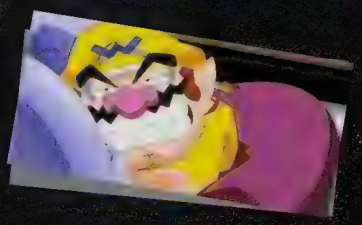
World building. It's all about world building. Creating moments where that world is watching you as much as you're watching it. "It's not how cool it was shooting something or using the game's mechanics, it's the situations they put you in," says Madureira. A lot of our levels start out with the situations. 'Hey, the Bat Queen is going to be fighting this beast throughout the whole church and you're going to see her three times, crashing through the wall,' stuff like that. The moments people are going to talk about after the game, we're starting with that and building around it. That's what makes games cool."

"No one ever lets you actually play the moment of the apocalypse. Guys will be in the bus screaming for their lives, everything. Chaos." Adams

System: Wii | Developer: Nintendo | Publisher: Nintendo | Available: Fall

Wario Land: SHAKE IT

I'll have a Wario Shake, please



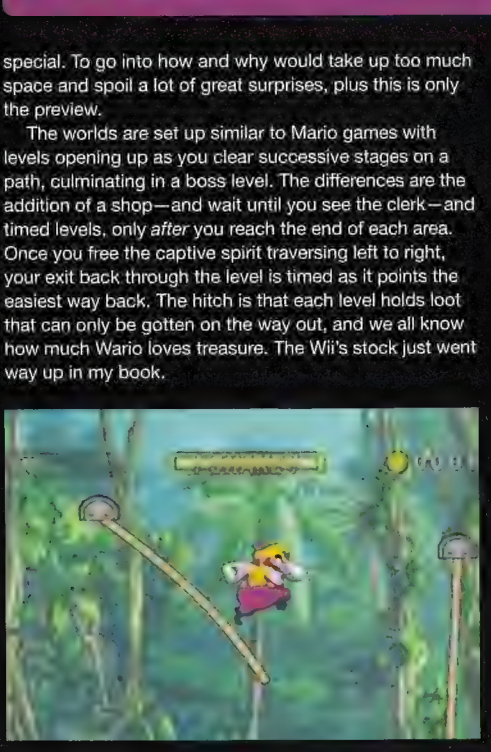
words Dave Halverson

What I love most about video games—and probably the reason I've spent half my life playing, writing and talking about them—is how they can elicit an emotional response to such a degree that you can mark that moment in time and remember it like it was yesterday forever. We all have them. That's what's so special about sci-fi and fantasy. Whether it's film, TV, or games, those pivotal moments are what fuel our passion and desire for more. I can recall the first time I stayed up all night for a game, playing The Legend of Zelda on NES, like it was yesterday…arriving at Jolly Roger Bay in Super Mario 64, the first time I laid eyes on Alucard running into the castle in Symphony of the Night, falling down the waterfall in Tomb Raider, the crows taking flight as I skated by in Rokkaku-Dai Heights in Jet Set Radio Future, and on and on. It's amazing after so many years that game's can still have that effect on me, but two in one month? Between Metal Gear Solid 4 and Wario Shake I'll never forget June of 2008—but I was expecting Metal Gear. Wario Shake was a gift from some alternate universe. Among many priceless Nintendo memories I treasure two things above all—Wario and a run of legendary side-scrollers that will stay with me forever. But those days are gone. The chances of a legendary first-party Nintendo side-scroller emerging on Wii these days are anorexic, but one starring Wario that I have no idea exists? I'd sooner hit the lottery…

When Brady said, "You might wanna get down here, Nintendo just dropped off some 2D Wario game" I was like, yeah, funny—you're hysterical. Plopping down in our game room (I bit of course) I had no idea what to expect, but I'll tell you what my very last guess would have been: an anime opening cinema by Production I.G. followed by a hand-drawn 2D game so beautifully animated and detailed that I literally couldn't speak. I know I'm a freak for getting so worked up, but the return of side-scrolling platformers utilizing today's technology is at the top of my wish list. When you play Wario Shake, you'll know why. This is a game full of invention that plays like a dream and looks like a Disney movie. By incorporating the Wii Remote's motion sensors into the gameplay Nintendo has created a new way to interact in 2D that is in a word—brilliant. Throwing objects at various switches and targets is achieved by tilting and releasing; ground pounding by a quick downwards strike; and shaking bags of money or enemies, take a wild guess. But that's just the tip of the iceberg. As the game progresses so does a tirade of fresh techniques and devices. The correlation between the motion sensing and the game's devices is pure heaven. This would be a great platformer on its own, but the added physical elements really make it something special. To go into how and why would take up too much space and spoil a lot of great surprises, plus this is only the preview.

> "This is a game full of invention that plays like a dream and looks like a Disney movie."

The worlds are set up similar to Mario games with levels opening up as you clear successive stages on a path, culminating in a boss level. The differences are the addition of a shop—and wait until you see the clerk—and timed levels, only *after* you reach the end of each area. Once you free the captive spirit traversing left to right, your exit back through the level is timed as it points the easiest way back. The hitch is that each level holds loot that can only be gotten on the way out, and we all know how much Wario loves treasure. The Wii's stock just went way up in my book.



Treasure!

The last time Wario got the call to action Treasure Co. did the honors and the results were spectacular. In honor of his arrival on Wii I popped in Wario World and, wow— is it just me or does it look better than 95% of the 3D games on Wii? I think a 2D mandate is in order here…next stop, Super Metroid 2!

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Jump in.

XBOX 360 LIVE

Resident Evil 5

What a can of worms

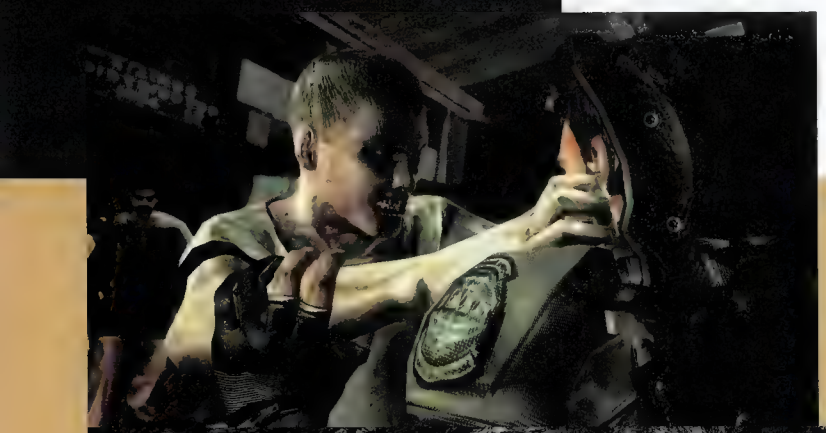
words Heather Campbell

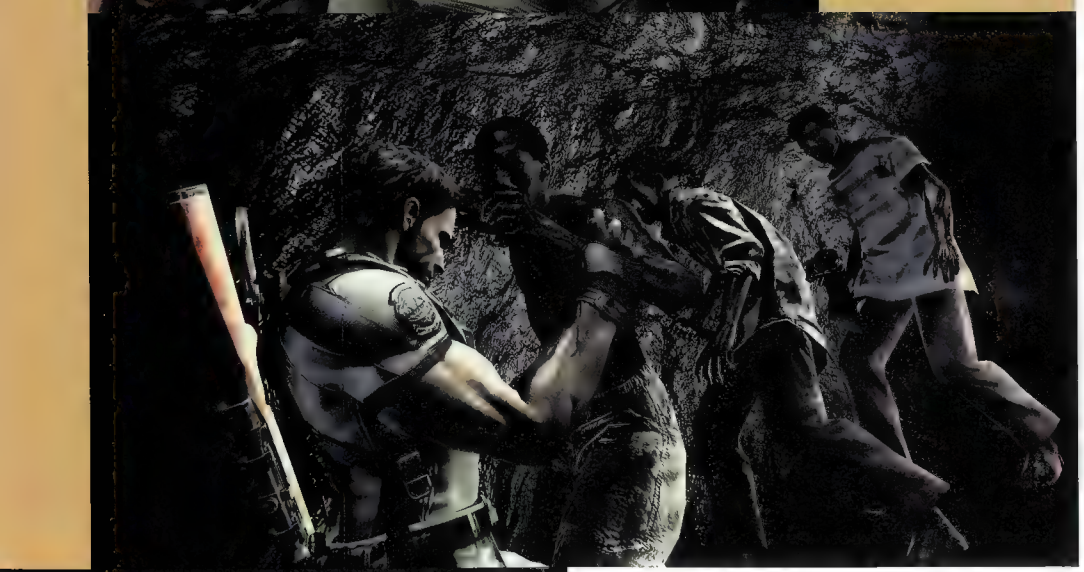
As excited as I am about Resident Evil 5, I dread having to draft some journalism on it. For the moment, I'll center myself on the game's play elements, before I dive into the more serious topic at hand.

Resident Evil 5 is an extension of the gameplay ideas set forth in Resident Evil 4. The same offset, cinematic third-person camera, the same bullet-dodging AI, boss encounters and expanded mythology. The leap from RE4 to RE5 is not going to be the same awe-inspiring jump that we made on the Gamecube; instead, developers at Capcom discovered what worked and are here to make it bigger. Red and Green Herbs? Check. Splitting-head parasites? Yep. Quick time events? More than ever.

A few basic changes were obvious—for one, weapons switching is handled in real time, and inventory is represented graphically on Chris Redfield's military garb. This is a welcome departure from the suitcase system of RE4, which, apart from being visually ridiculous, was a detriment to the game's pacing. Another exciting shift is the addition of a female sidekick who can hold her own ground. Details are few and far between, but producers at Captivate '08 *hinted* at co-op play. Environments are more destructible—if enemies can knock down walls, we assume Chris can blast a hole in the building to escape from the gnashing teeth of the infected.

Now, the story of Resident Evil 5 involves the origins of the Progenitor virus, and the game takes Chris Redfield to Africa, where a small village has been overrun by an outbreak. This is where a lot of the controversy surrounding the title comes in. Obviously, a zombie game in Africa is going to feature black zombies. And our hero, Chris? Well, he's white.





"Producer Jun Takeuchi told us that some of his development team went to Africa to do location studies."

Despite the lack of *intentional* racism in the title, a game featuring a muscular white hero blasting through mobs of poor black villagers is going to dredge up a few social anxieties. Producer Jun Takeuchi told us that some of his development team went to Africa to do location studies, and the game represents the local demographic they witnessed firsthand. He also stated that the response to the original trailer did not in any way affect the team's decision to include a (mixed-race?) sidekick.

Unfortunately, this may not be a question of intentions. The visuals are disturbing, not only because they're *empty* and offer no commentary, but because there is a very real history of white colonization at the expense of black indigenous people. It's the reason Capcom probably wouldn't make a game that featured Japanese military personnel slaying hundreds of Korean and Chinese villagers. Or, for that matter, an American protagonist armed and fighting dead-eyed Japanese locals during World War II.

I get that the last game featured Spanish zombies, and no one batted an eye. But that's because imagery of subhuman Spanish locals has probably never been used to suppress Spanish people. Black people, on the other hand, have had until recently to deal with very popular and insulting dehumanization.

The game is, at this point, only half as interesting as the conversations it's forcing us to have. Capcom's PR team is going to have a difficult task ahead of them if they want to keep this from becoming the next Hot Coffee. Or worse.

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Project Origin

Bad girls grow up to be even badder

words Brady Fiechter

"We've always been sort of a B-game team size, trying to do triple-A titles. On this project we've brought in a lot more talent."

So what's really the deal with that creepy chick who casts waves of fire with her mind and kills with a blink of an eye? Will the story make more sense this time? FEAR was a great first-person shooter in many ways, but Monolith believe they know exactly where it wasn't that great, and they're closing in on proving that their creative juices are darker and even more potent than before. Lead designer John Mulkey spills some thoughts on the next chapter in this much-anticipated sequel, Project Origin.

play: FEAR was a great game. It got a great critical reception, but personally, looking back, where is one area you know you went wrong and needed to address for the sequel?
John Mulkey: Well, I guess one of the main themes we addressed when going into making the sequel was that of variety. With the first game, we really targeted the idea of hitting big, sort of epic-scale moments, big action-movie scenes as playable spaces, then having the rest of the game support that. When we went into production, we had so many risks on our plate as far as new technology, all sorts of new elements, that we ended up not executing as deeply as we wanted to on those. So we ended up with some of those things not coming to pass. The game ended up being, as people criticized, 17,000 floors of office space, you know, and you're either in an office space or some sort of basement. [laughs] It's something I felt very strongly about; I was really unhappy with it in the first game. I wanted to make sure we had a really strong visual diversity in the game, so you have a good sense of progression through the space, you were moving into identifiable things. You were moving from certain color palettes and feels to new color palettes and that sort of thing. So you had a sense that, "I'm making progress in the game, I'm moving to new and exciting things." I really wanted to make sure you got that sense of progression: "Oh, here's a new enemy, a new weapon, a new experience entirely." We did a much better job of executing that on this project.

Good answer. That's exactly what I needed to hear. Is it maybe a little easier to go forward with these improvements, knowing that your foundational gameplay was so tight to begin with?
The engine is basically a variant of an internal engine we've been working on from the beginning. We're constantly building. The big leap we made on FEAR was, we went to the whole per-pixel lighting and normal maps and all that sort of stuff. With this project we've added all sorts of craziness as well. [laughs] We've had more people involved this time to manage all that. Before, we were a pretty limited group of individuals trying to pull off a rather daunting task, and we've had a lot more people on board for this project than in the past. We've always been sort of a B-game team size, trying to do triple-A titles. On this project we've brought in a lot more talent. It's just been a little bit easier to execute.

Talking about the size of the team, how much crossover do you have with the Condemned guys?
We do have separate teams but we kind of flex back and forth depending on the needs. When Condemned 2 wrapped up, a lot of those guys moved over to Project Origin. That was great, because, like I said, we went from kind of...Monolith has always done this—it's been horrible but exciting at the same time—we've always had a small group of people really reach beyond their grasp, you know, so having all those people come onto the project has been exciting. It's given us an opportunity to really fulfill the design goals properly.

Do you see yourself designing more for the console audience, designing any differently? The first FEAR was made exclusive with the PC in mind.
Well, it's the thing that is new to us and we have to execute on well. Yeah, when we made FEAR, it was a PC game. And then an entirely different team brought it to console. And there were things we were happy about and things we weren't happy about on that. So as we moved on to doing Project Origin, we decided that if we were going to move on and do console development for shooters, then we're going to do it internally and control our own destiny. We're going to make sure we do it to our satisfaction. So it was sort of a new aspect; we felt confident we could deliver a sequel on the PC and do well with it, but getting our style of combat, our whole presentation of what we wanted for this game, to feel good with a controller versus a keyboard and a mouse, that's a big challenge. And that's something that makes or breaks your game. When you pick up that controller, it's either going to be a non-issue—you just don't care about it and it feels natural, and you're into the game—or it's going to stick out and put you completely off the game.

Playing a lot of first-person shooters, you do start to notice how every one feels a bit different. How do you determine from your end what that sweet spot really is in getting the motion just right?
We've dissected a lot of the competition. We take a look at games we've played that we've had good experiences with; you take a look at a game like Call of Duty 4, Halo, they've really done a good job of taking the shooter to the console. And they've both done so in absolutely different ways. What we do, you know, we're sort of students of design, if you will. You take a look at what other people have done and you look at their success and failures. We can identify some things that really make the difference, see how that plays into what we're trying to accomplish with our game. Obviously you don't just go, "Hey, let's go copy Call of Duty 4" or whatever. You

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"I'm all about pacing. If you have 45 minutes of nonstop white-knuckle combat, it's going to become numbing."

just tune and tune and tune with what feels right.

Once you've established a franchise and start to think about that sequel, I would argue the second game tends to be the one that is most scrutinized. Expectations are in a very different place.
The only reason we're doing a sequel is because a lot of people loved the original. And so we literally scrubbed forums. We went and looked to see what people are reacting to that they really liked in the initial game. And what did they really dislike? We really took it all to heart. Those fit right into the core goals for the game design, and then we, within ourselves, thought, "Where do we want to go with this? Where do we want to go with this franchise?" Even in the design phases early on, we were doing play testing without a game, bringing people in, throwing things at them, seeing how they'd respond. It's almost been like a community-driven thing in the sense of a general direction, and then we take it beyond, where we really want it to go.

And one of those places you're taking Project Origin, you're opening up the spaces a little bit? I liked that the first game was very tight, putting you in close-quarters combat. You're counterbalancing that indoor-outdoor more?
Yeah, we are. It's kind of an interesting balance you have to maintain. You don't want to become...you know, I talk a lot about listening to the community responses. You don't want to become reactionary though, either. You still have to be intelligent about the decisions. Anyone can jump in and go, "Flying monkeys, yeah, flying monkeys would be awesome!" But no, flying monkeys don't fit into the game. So one of the things we did, we wanted to open up the spaces, we wanted to get a little bit more into open environments. Because in the first game, we had a few open environments, but my theory is that because the color palette was so muted—you went from being inside a warehouse that had gray wall, gray floor, gray ceiling, into an outdoor courtyard that had gray cement floor, gray walls and a gray overcast sky—it didn't really feel like you were outdoors. So we started with the idea of, yes, we wanted to open things up. But like I say, we don't want to be reactionary. Once you get into that open space, what do we do with that? Open spaces aren't by nature necessarily cool for gameplay. We started to work on designs for combat and characters that would take advantage of the open environment and make it fun, make it feel like it's a necessary part of the gameplay.

I would say that those more claustrophobic moments are what I liked most about FEAR; it's what really marked the game for me. I'm assuming you won't abandon that.
No no no. You want it to breathe. I'm all about pacing. It's all about palate cleansers and stuff like that. If you have 45 minutes of nonstop white-knuckle combat, it's going to become numbing. You just have to break that up. We have those spaces that are tight, claustrophobic, they're oppressive. But we want them to be that way for the pacing.

Going back to the origins of FEAR, when you guys were first preparing your initial designs, you have this fairly unique mixture of horror and military in what is essentially a modern setting. I can imagine the challenge of balancing those ingredients and making it effective.
Absolutely. Craig Hubbard, who was the game designer on the first project—I was the lead level designer—it came from him. We had done shooters here at Monolith from day one practically, and that was kind of what we were into, and he's a very big fan of Japanese horror. He had become excited about trying to do something really different. Definitely the idea of combining Japanese horror with modern combat was different. But it was a challenge, learning the vocabulary of combining these. There was a lot of experimentation that happened along the way to try and find that mix of what's effective and what's not.

With that sense of discovery along the way, finding firm ground to stand on with FEAR, is there an easier path to go off here?
It's a mixed bag. You've established a vocabulary, you've kind of fleshed out the universe a bit. Craig is the first one to admit this, the story on the first game...ehhh... [laughs] It was...

Convoluted at times...
Well, it was constantly evolving over the course of the game, it was something where any given day the intent of the game could change, you know. [laughs] It just wasn't told in a way that was as eloquent or as strong, or even as well focused as we would have liked, but it still came across. We've really learned a lot since then.

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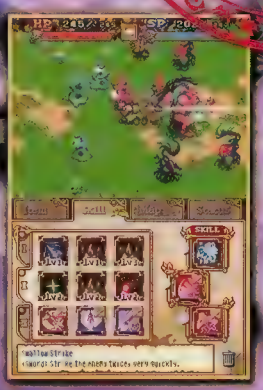

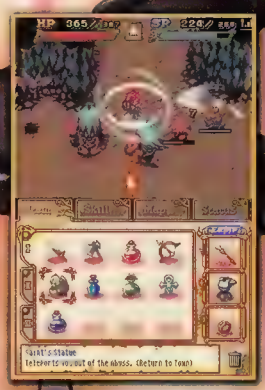

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System: PS3, Xbox 360 | **Developer:** 2XL Games Inc | **Publisher:** THQ | **Available:** September 8

BAJ

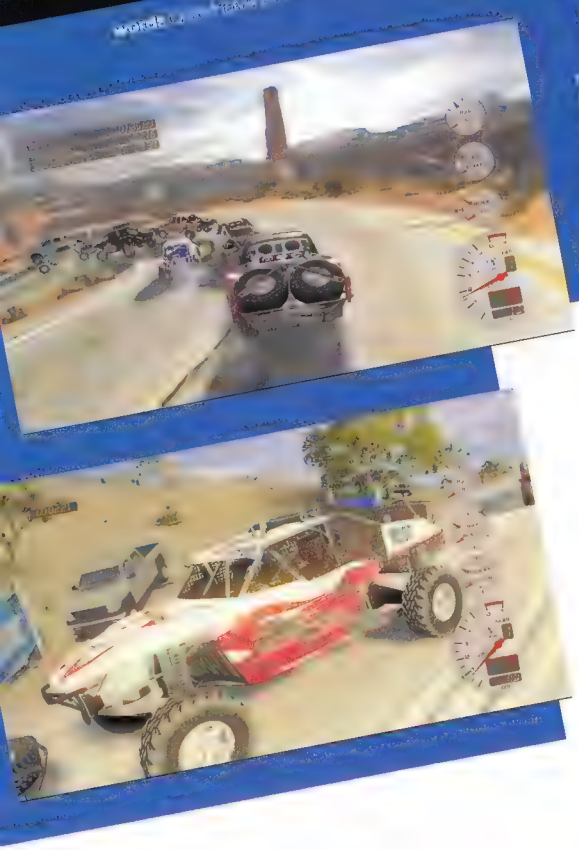
Edge of Control

2XL shatters the MPG (miles per game) barrier

There's no denying the effect that recent strides in technology have had on modern racing games. From terrain deformation, exacting physics and meticulously simulated weather effects to pristine car bike, driver and rider models and real-time damage and destruction, there's never been a better time to be a racing game fan—and it's about to get even better.

For all of this new technology, the basic principles of racing games haven't changed all that much. We're still e round and round, on rallies, or zipping across "open" yet limited environments...until now. Nothing beats the feeling of freedom and adrenaline that comes from racing across hundreds of miles of open terrain, never knowing what lies ahead, and there's no better race to experience it than the Baja 1000, 300 seamless miles of which you can experience firsthand in Baja: Edge of Control. Experience Career, Circuit, Rally, Hill Climb, and Open racing in the Baja Bug, Unlimited VW, 4x4, Open Wheel, Mini Truck, Full-size Truck, Class 1 Unlimited and Trophy Truck classes. And after the dust settles—or before if you so desire—you can roll into 10-player online or go free wheelin' in the off-road gaming world's largest free-roaming playgrounds.

Baja marks the first title from 2XL Games, led by former Rainbow Studios chairman Ean Farred, vice chair Madden, lead tech programmer Rick Baltman and chief designer Robb Rinard. Take it away, Robb.



interview

Robb Rinard, chief designer, 2XL Games Inc.

Play: Tell us about 2XL and your goals as a new studio.
Robb Rinard: The answer is actually hidden inside the name of our company, 2XL Games. First off, we want *to excel* in life, and secondly we enjoy things that go fast, thus, *to accel*. Put the two together and you get 2XL Games. We enjoy simulating all things vehicular, from airplanes and ATVs to Baja bugs and trophy trucks. Our goal is simple: create great entertainment that appeals to the broadest range of people.

It's one thing to make a quality off-road racing game, but to create one of such magnitude with gameplay reactive to the terrain as it applies to each vehicle is another story. How has Baja's development differed from previous games? Also, how do you achieve such a high level of authenticity?

From a creative standpoint, Baja: Edge of Control was created the same way we developed our previous off-road offerings, such as ATV Offroad Fury and MX Unleashed. We spend countless hours hanging out with the top people in the sport, learning as much as we can by studying what they do and how they do it. We sent the 2XL team to a bunch of off-road races and nature trips, took over 40,000 reference photos and filmed hours of high-definition video. We also recorded 57 different off-road trucks and race cars to get the sound as authentic as possible.

The sense of authenticity that you feel when driving our Baja vehicles comes from years of working with my partner Rick Baltman. When it comes to designing physics simulations, Rick and I are a great team. He's classically schooled in physics simulation, whereas I learn everything through careful observation. Baja is the fourth time we've collaborated together to build a physics system from the ground up, and the first time on the latest generation of consoles. The added power of the Xbox 360 and PS3 allows us to run our simulations at a very high iteration rate that brings out a great sense of depth in the driving experience. As a result, Baja really delivers on the sense of driving on the edge of control.

"Our worlds are roughly 25 times larger than those found in our previous games." —**Robb Rinard**

Considering the number of races and classes, along with the Baja itself, the amount of content seems almost overwhelming. How big a game is it?
The scope of the races in Baja exceeded our expectations for what we thought we could create. Our worlds are roughly 25 times larger than those found in our previous games, and that really opened the door to some great long-distance driving. We have over 95 different races, including the classic off-road race the Baja 1000. Our version of the 1000 is about a 300-mile drive, where you will never drive on the same piece of terrain twice. This is a very different experience from what racing fans are used to. Most endurance races involve going round and round on a track for hours on end. Our artists were able to produce very large-scale worlds that deliver on the sense of going somewhere, better than any game I've ever played before. When you couple this with a really solid physics engine, you get not only a great racing game, but a unique driving experience as well.

Racing the 300-mile Baja, how open is the environment? Where do you place the boundaries? How wide is the terrain at its widest point?
The environments are always wide open, with practically no boundaries. The race rules, however, are a different story. We started out at the beginning of the project hoping to minimize the race rules, but as soon as we started play testing, we quickly realized that without a structured set of rules, people were more likely to abandon the track and just spend time driving the countryside. The shipping

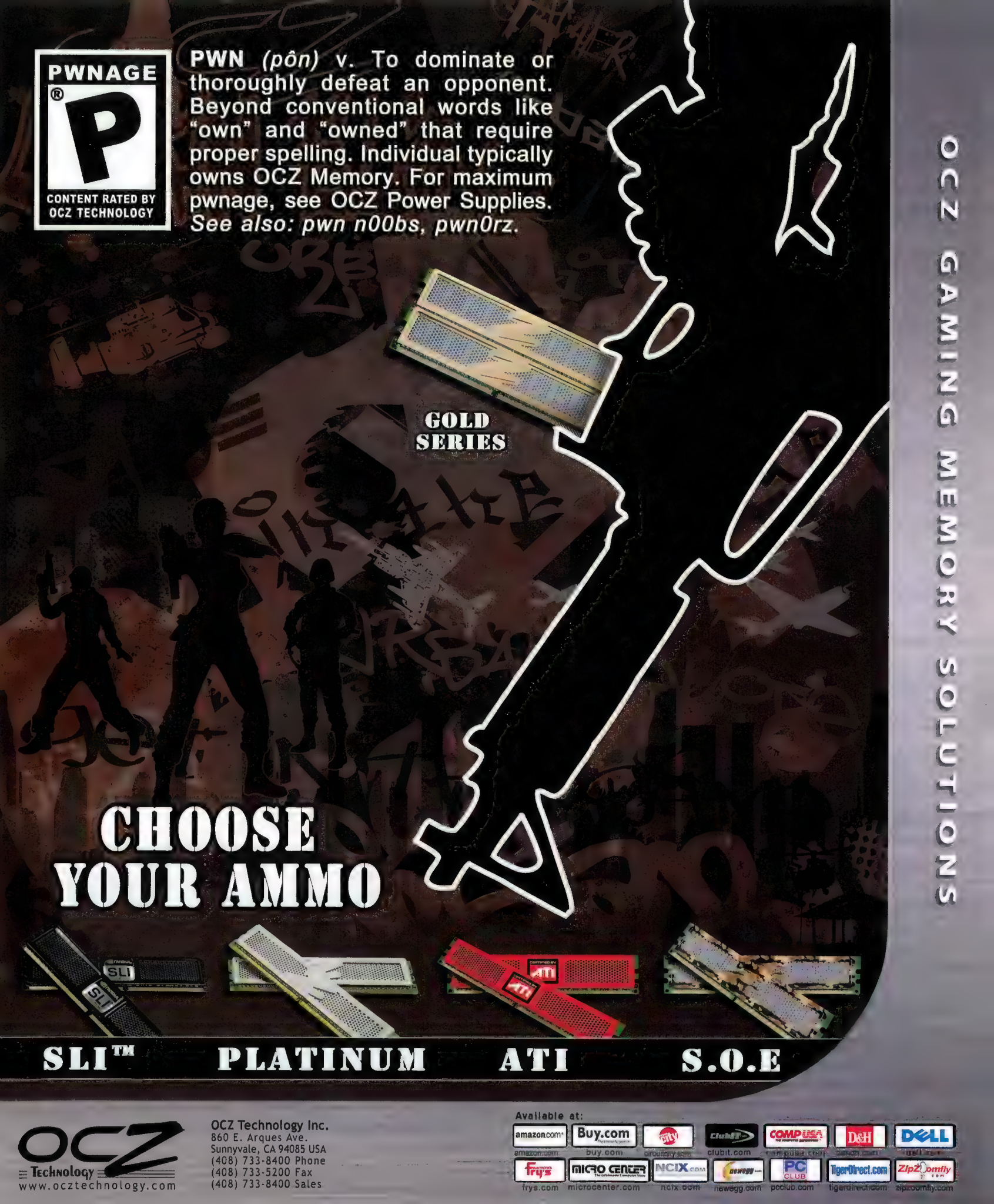
BAJA
Edge of Control

"The added power of the Xbox 360 and PS3 allows us to run our simulations at a very high iteration rate that brings out a great sense of depth in the driving experience."

version of our track management system allows much more freedom than you had in our previous titles, but still forces the player to stay engaged in the race, and prevents others from cheating the race. In the end, our rules have to be strict enough to maintain a level playing field in multiplayer racing. It's very important to us that Baja deliver a great online racing experience for up to 10 people at a time.

Why no bikes? Malcolm Smith would not approve! I want my Husqvarna!
I've designed six MX games over the past 10 years and really wanted to tackle a four-wheeled driving game. Our original pitch to our publisher was: We want to make the Gran Turismo of off-road racing. We wanted to focus all of our efforts on doing one thing, and do it really well. The more vehicle types we include in the game, the more we have to split our time between working on each one, and the lower the overall quality will be as a result. Baja: Edge of Control is a driving game. You can catch some air, but it's not a jumping game like MX. In fact, the object of this game is to keep your wheels on the ground with the throttle pinned. Time spent in the air is time spent not accelerating.

Truer words have never been spoken. Thanks, Robb.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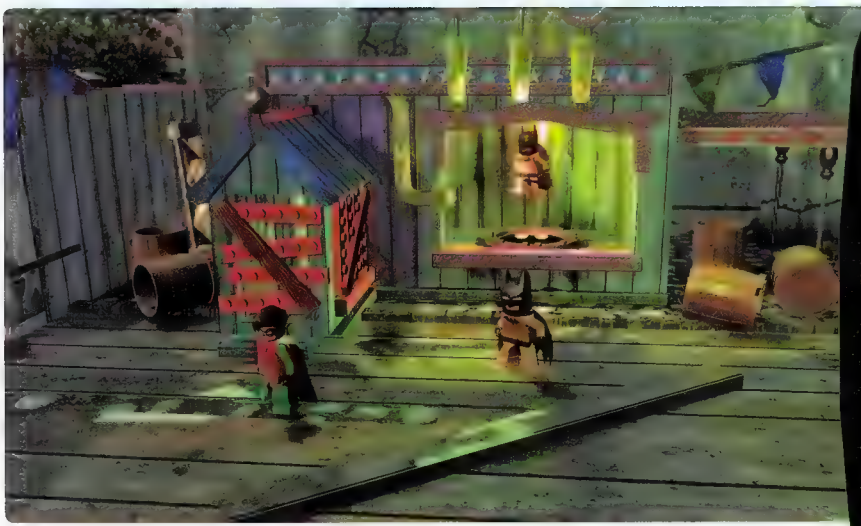
BLOCKHEADS

The Dark Knight returns. Again.

words Greg Orlando

With Lego Batman: The Videogame rapidly nearing its completion, the game's lead designer, Loz Doyle, dropped the batarangs for a few scant moments to conduct an e-mail interview with Play.



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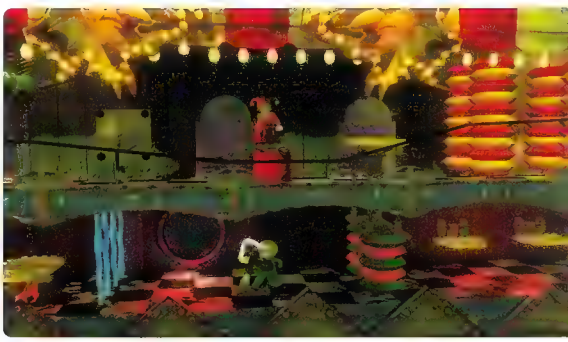
Play: Explain the allure of Lego-themed videogames.

Loz Doyle: Lego comes from the Danish "leg godt," which roughly means "to play well." It's a rare toy in that it is literally constructive rather than destructive, and has a universal appeal across all cultures. We've all grown up with this amazing product and can remember the first house or car we made and now we get to transfer that creation and appeal to our videogames.

How does Lego Batman differ from, say, Lego Indiana Jones or Lego Star Wars?

We'd hate to ever be accused of simply "reskinning" that title with each new game.

We really try to ensure that with each title we are improving the game and making sure that we create a true Lego universe. As Indiana Jones was all about the mystery and adventure from his films, we had a



character in a real-world setting solving puzzles and using his brawling skills to get out of his various scrapes. A Lego Batman is an entirely different character than Indy, and we had to ensure we reflect that in the game. Batman and Robin are both very skilled and athletic martial artists, so you'll see a lot more action in Lego Batman: The Videogame. Through the vast R&D budget at WayneCorp, they also have access to a variety of technology suits and batarangs, which will enhance the characters' abilities or enable them to access those hidden areas in the game.

We've seen many different versions of Batman emerge over the years: the grim crusader created by Bill Kane, the more lighthearted Batman of the 1950s, the downright campy Adam West version, the near-crazed Dark Knight as done by Frank Miller. Can you tell us about your version of Batman and how he compares (if at all) to the Batmen in the comics/movies/TV show?
Well, we hope that we have created the ultimate interactive Lego Batman. There's no real formula, but we've been able to take the minifigures and models created by Lego, as well as some of our own, and look throughout the huge Batman universe and create what we believe is a pretty fun Batman, but one that still kicks ass. It's definitely not as dark as *Batman Begins*, nor as funny as other iterations of Batman.

In this vein, are you emphasizing Batman as a superhero, a detective, or both? And why?
Both, as that's what he is. He's the greatest detective ever known, but he's undoubtedly a superhero. Batman will need all skills available to him to restore peace to Gotham in the game.

Batman is, traditionally, a darker character than Indiana Jones or most of the *Star Wars* characters. How do you balance the need to stay true to the character while still presenting him in a style that fits with a Lego-based game?
We've found that quite often, the darker the material, the greater opportunity we have in creating a Lego game. *Episode III* was the darkest of the *Star Wars* films by a long way, but it meant that we had an opportunity to present a lighter and funnier alternative with our storytelling in the cut-scenes. This was the same with *Temple of Doom* in the Indy trilogy. It's a pretty dark story but the cut-scenes are quite cheeky.

Lego Batman will have the same cheeky humor throughout the game, but we've still created very cool characters that you'll instantly recognize from the DC Universe.

Tell us about the game's story line. Omit no earthly detail.
It's the classic Batman story line. All of the villains have escaped from Arkham Asylum (possibly the least secure secure-facility in the world?) and are creating havoc throughout Gotham. You take up the reins as the dynamic duo and you have to round up the bad guys. Or you can play from the villains' perspective and give Commissioner Gordon a nightmare as you run wild through the city.

Can you explain how the villains' perspective works in the context of the game?
Essentially you'll be able to play the same story from the villains' perspective. So where you may have been rescuing Gordon from the Joker's clutches in hero mode, when you play in villain mode you'll see how the luckless commissioner came to be captured.

What role does Robin play in terms of the adventure?
The two-player gameplay is a massive part of our games. As one half of the dynamic duo, Robin will be integral to that. He'll be working alongside Batman through all of the hero levels and he'll have different abilities with his variety of technology suits.

We're thinking guest appearances are due: Superman, Nightwing and Batgirl. Please discuss.

"We've found that quite often, the darker the material, the greater opportunity we have in creating a Lego game."

I can't give away too much right now, but there will be a fantastic array of characters from the Batman universe in the final game.

Tell us about Gotham City as done in Lego Batman: The Videogame.
We've endeavored to create a Lego Gotham City. We've created some areas which you'll recognize as being fairly classic to the Batman universe, where we've taken inspiration from the wealth of source material for Batman. It's great, as some of the darker streets in the city create a great contrast with these really bright characters that are in the game.

Batman has a sizable rogues gallery. Tell us about the game's villains.
One of my favorite things about working on this game has been putting in the fantastic villain minifigures. I think the range of baddies Lego created for their sets are the best range of minifigures they have created, including The Joker, Catwoman, Harley Quinn, Bane, Killer Croc, The Penguin, Two-Face, The Riddler, Clayface...We've been able to put all of them in the game and our artists have had great fun creating some new characters.

Tell us one thing about Lego Batman: The Videogame that no one else knows.
It's the best game we've ever made.

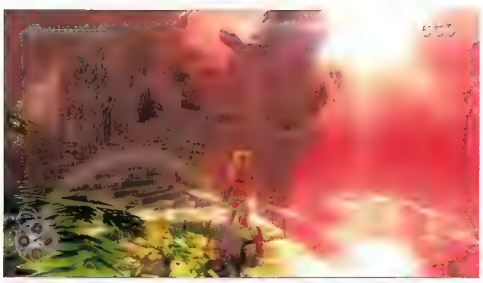
X-Blades

Calling all heroine addicts

words Dave Halverson

Whoever says that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach hasn't seen X-Blades. The way to a man's heart is through his eyeballs, ogling a pair of supple butt cheeks while systematically beating things to death. Toss in a control pad, scorching pyrotechnics and gorgeous visuals, and you've got yourself a stupefied male of the species. Russia's Gaijin Studios obviously recognize this, and if they know half as much about balancing gameplay as they do lady lumps, we're in for an epic hack 'n' slash adventure. They've certainly got the hacking and slashing down to a science.

The gameplay has come a long way since I first laid hands on X-Blades back in March. The impetus of Ayumi's Gun Blades, along with her lock-on and evasive roll have been nicely refined. The spell system has come a long way, too. Although it's obviously still in the balancing stages, the sorcery and various super-skills look spectacular. Offensive tactics come by way of ranged and melee combat in conjunction with Ayumi's

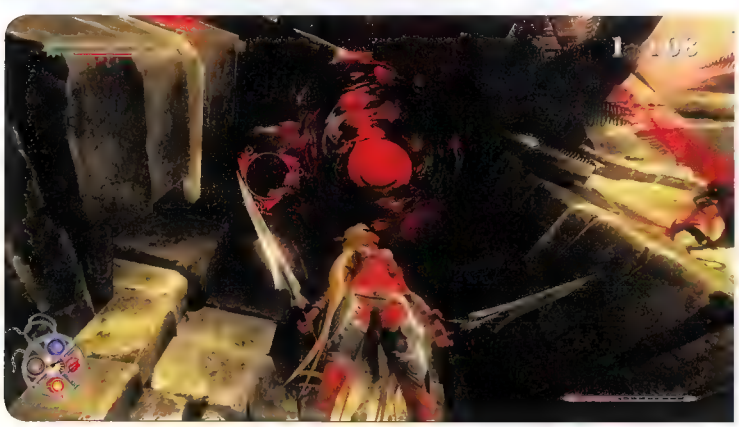


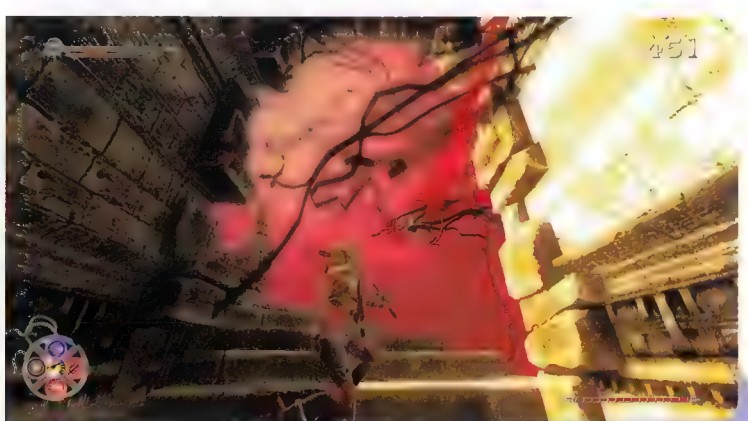
"...if they know half as much about balancing gameplay as they do lady lumps, we're in for an epic hack 'n' slash adventure."

rage meter, which fills as she hacks away at lesser creatures, allowing her to unleash a variety of elemental attacks. Each spell (bound to the corresponding button of your choosing) requires a certain amount of rage, creating a gratifying combination of combat and spell casting. Skills and spells, both offensive and healing, are purchased by amassing enough souls to attain progressively stronger magic in accord with the increasingly potent demon hordes. The objective is to fight well and avoid spending souls on healing (Ayumi's health regenerates very slowly), while racking up combo-multipliers to maximize Ayumi's souls for trade.

The overall construct is based primarily on area clearing. Upon arriving in each region, the exit is sealed off until key inhabitants are vanquished, along with any stragglers. Gaijin mix things up well though incorporating scores of well hidden artifacts (used to level-up Ayumi's attacks) accessible by well-timed jumps or by raiding sarcophagi, and a few twists as the story comes into focus. I ran across a cool trap and jumping puzzle too. The gameplay never veers away from straight-ahead action, but the item and character management add a welcome measure of diversity.

Aside from the additional fine-tuning and balancing reserved for the latter stages of development, I have but two concerns (it would have been three, but Gaijin has already redesigned the onscreen displays): Ayumi moves beautifully but desperately needs walking animation, and her current voice-over (I pray it's placeholder) is the kind of '80s valley-girl irritating that makes you develop a twitch. I'm not wild about Jay either (a fellow adventurer who pops in to assist in key battles), but my eyes are usually fixed elsewhere.





System: Arcade, 360, PS3 | **Developer:** Capcom | **Publisher:** Capcom | **Available:** July (Arcade), 360/PS3 TBA

Street Fighter IV

Elegance at the end of a fist

words Heather Campbell

Gentlemen! I come before you today to quiet your fears regarding the release of Street Fighter IV, a Capcom arcade fighting game. Truth be known, it has been an uneasy decade since the release of Street Fighter III—a game that was met with great enthusiasm among the hardcore set, whilst being ignored by the general populace. I have heard it said, sirs, that the game's technical difficulty was too unforgiving, its roster of characters unfamiliar, and the rapid release of revisions was, how should we say, off-putting to those more casual fans. In order to play Street Fighter III effectively, a graduation of skill was required, and very few players were willing to put forth the hours necessary with machines—if, indeed, they could even find one in the dying American arcade scene.

Capcom has heard your complaints, though, gentlemen. They have toiled at the anvil, patiently hammering out a game that would appeal to the larger, lost audience, while retaining a sharp edge of technical play that would draw in the III fanatics. What they have achieved is a game that shall be embraced by nostalgics, exploited by enthusiastic fighting fans and celebrated by all but the narrowest line of ultra high-end technical players (and those dedicated souls still have Street Fighter III to play, if they so desire).

Gentlemen, I have spent many hours playing Street Fighter IV, and let me tell you: It is good. While this new entry does not have the immediate novelty of the game from which it draws so heavily (this being Street Fighter II), it does manage to arouse an atmosphere of mirth that has been so lacking of late in the arcade fighting scene. Tekken 6, I stare at thee disdainfully. Guilty Gear, your emo-guitar melodies, manic special moves and cosplay-baiting design smack of anime in-jokes. Soul Caliber IV...need I say more than "Yoda" to draw out a blush of embarrassment? Oh, Virtua Fighter, you alone stand as a representative of the old guard, but in your attention to every frame-specific moment of combat, you have lost sight of fun itself. Yet, Street Fighter IV, you do not disappoint. Indeed, drawing up from the well of Street Fighter IV, we find fun in such quantity that we shan't be thirsty again. The glaringly obvious choice of character expression brings so much bliss to the title (and is so frustratingly impossible to convey with screenshots) that it heralds a near revolution. A fighting game that allows for laughter in its final moments? Think on it. Cutting to close-ups of impending attacks, as slow-motion antagonists go slack-jawed—the laughter that spills forth from our lungs is not the clever congratulations bestowed on a good punch line, but rather the kind of laughter that rips out of us when we're overjoyed. It is the laughter most often followed by cheers. And, I will remind those who are still skeptical that Street Fighter has always been over-the-top. Recall, if you will, that Blanka used to vomit on his own chest.

As has been discussed before, fighting in Street Fighter IV takes place on a two-dimensional plane with three-dimensional characters. Until recently, these three-dimensional characters responded to one another's pugilism with three-dimensional accuracy, which meant, unfortunately, that combat did not feel "Street Fighter" enough. So it was with great wisdom that producer Yoshinori Ono reimagined the combat engine as a two-dimensional one, where contact between characters was not polygon-specific, but more traditionally based on invisible, 2-D hit boxes. Cross-ups, counters, and two-in-ones come at the same tempo as earlier Street Fighter titles, despite the illusion of lethargy that comes with such smooth animation. The pace of combat falls somewhere between SSF2 Turbo and the original build of Street Fighter III. Fear not. My brothers, I want you to get excited about this game. It is too often that our industry prides itself on disdain, as if the salt of judgment would keep us free from vulnerability. Leave your vanity behind and come, play Street Fighter IV with the wide-eyed joy of abandonment.

> "Capcom lost an audience when they left everyone but Ryu behind in Street Fighter III. Do they deserve your derision for attempting the opposite?"

For some, the roster of characters is a disappointment; so many slots filled with familiar faces. To address this, I'll not only point out that the release list of characters for home versions is being expanded (Dan and Fei Long seem confirmed), but I'll also say that seeing these iconic figures in such startling detail is a bit—a bit—like seeing them for the first time. We already know most of the moves, but have we ever smashed in to a close-up of Ken's face, as he cops a grin before delivering his knockout attack? Jaded sirs, I ask you to investigate the new characters: Crimson Viper, El Fuerte, Abel, and Rufus. Crimson Viper attacks with a reach that reminds me of Cammy or Elena, and has a certain SNK appeal. El Fuerte is an unusual mix of speed and throwing combat. Abel is slow, specific, like Alex. And Rufus is an embarrassing fanboy of a fighter, disgusting to watch and delightful to play. Capcom lost an audience when they left everyone but Ryu behind in Street Fighter III. Do they deserve your derision for attempting the opposite?

The most exciting new aspect of the game, the Focus attacks, are the evidence of a game built both for new fans and technical players. Press "medium punch" and "kick" together, and your character charges up an unblockable move. Simple, and immediately gratifying for casual gamers. But technical fighters, hear me out: The first seconds of the Focus charge function as a parry—that's right, a parry. Timing the Focus charge correctly means absorbing fireballs without taking damage (the damage incurred recharges to the health meter if combatants avoid taking any more hits), and the Focus attack can be canceled with a dash. Furthermore, special moves can be canceled by Focusing...meaning that this simple system can be exploited for an entirely different depth of play. Two new players will enjoy the bravado of Street Fighter IV. Two hardcore fighters will use Focus attacks to engage an entirely different game.

Gentlemen, I implore you. If you live in a large city, find the arcade that imports cabinets and play Street Fighter IV with all your heart. If not, buy an arcade stick and set it up at home; take on challengers from all over the world. This game is a triumph of nostalgia and design. It gives us enough of our childhood, but treats it with the spirit of reverence that is so often lost on retro-minded titles. It's a good game, worthy of the roaring IV seared into its placard.

Fallout 3

The end of the world as we know it

"This is an insufferable place, and Bethesda's gift for creating a convincing world seems much better suited here than it ever was in Oblivion."

words Brady Fiechter

Fallout 3 begins with a miracle, observing the birth of a child who will quickly grow into adulthood and fight for a life in a world where miracles no longer matter. Who you are as a grown man or woman is up to the god of your own making: Choose your personalized skills, dictate your physical attributes, become the survivor you always wanted to be on a tragic postapocalyptic Earth.

The setting is a decimated future Washington, D.C., and the surrounding area, its pestilence housing bands of thieves, gangs of survival, loners looking to simply live without going mad. There is plenty of life left on this little slice of hell, the kind of life that sometimes comes with an extra appendage or other mutation. The occasional monster or two. This is an insufferable place, and Bethesda's gift for creating a convincing world seems much better suited here than it ever was in Oblivion. It doesn't hurt that, as Bethesda notes, this time out they have a much firmer handle on the production process and boast twice the detail onscreen.

My first substantial look at Fallout 3 begins in the heart of downtown D.C., or at least what's left of it. The torn steel, collapsed streets and crumbling government monuments take on a creepy tone of irony amid fictional newspaper headlines of "Lying: Congressional Style." In a game that has placed claim on 50 to 70 hours of play, this quick snippet of gameplay gets a pass for establishing a banal stretch of typical videogame wasteland. As Fallout 3 moves toward the countryside, things get a lot more fascinating in a hurry. A small party of humans with a healthy ox for support greet you on a lonely hill, and a very cool *Lost In Space* robot chills a stone's throw away. Moving from the sunbaked exterior and into the decrepit interiors, the game's dreary detail takes shape. It's such a small slice of the post-nuclear landscape in Fallout 3, but the mood has been firmly and impressively established. I already want to know everything about this place, where it goes next, how my actions will truly impact the inhabitants: Can 500 or so variants on the ending of the game really connect the implications the designers are going for?

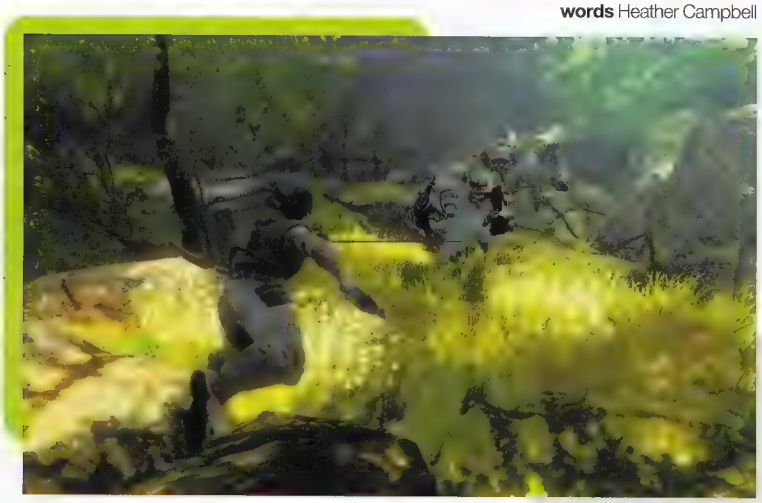
Fallout 3 is not a conquest about every man for himself—but if that's your chosen path, there will be consequences, just as there are for any decision, both minor and severe. A karma system spins the moral compass as you progress: Decide to, say, detonate a bomb and wipe out an entire group of innocents (is anyone really innocent here?) and the idea is that you will experience tangible effects on the world. How you approach the gameplay will often come down to how you decided to train your character with experience points, perhaps adding to the Lady Killer slot for added benefits against fending off woman attackers, or upping your conversation skills and avoiding combat with a slick tongue. Rely too much on certain drugs to augment these skills and you risk addiction. In a world like this, seems like the best choice.

"It's difficult getting into the grappling at first, but like dragon punching (or Katamari rolling), once you *get it*, you get it."

Bionic Commando

Death by dreads

words Heather Campbell



Did you know? The new big thing in video games is updating series we haven't heard from in a decade. NiGHTS, Street Fighter IV, Kid Icarus, and Bionic Commando make it hard not to imagine a three-dimensional Low G Man coming to the PS3. Where's our Ecco the Dolphin? What happened to Bubsy? Man, I can't wait for the next Clayfighter!

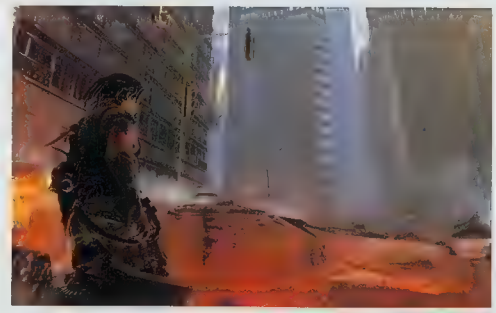
Bionic Commando isn't just an update, it's a whole new reimaging, a fleshing out of the core mechanic of the original BC. The grappling hook is the nucleus around which the entire game is designed. Though the trailer makes you think Spider-Man, the physics-based swing mechanic is not nearly as shallow as the stuff we've seen from the Marvel hero. It's difficult getting into the grappling at first, but like dragon punching (or Katamari rolling), once you *get it*, you get it.

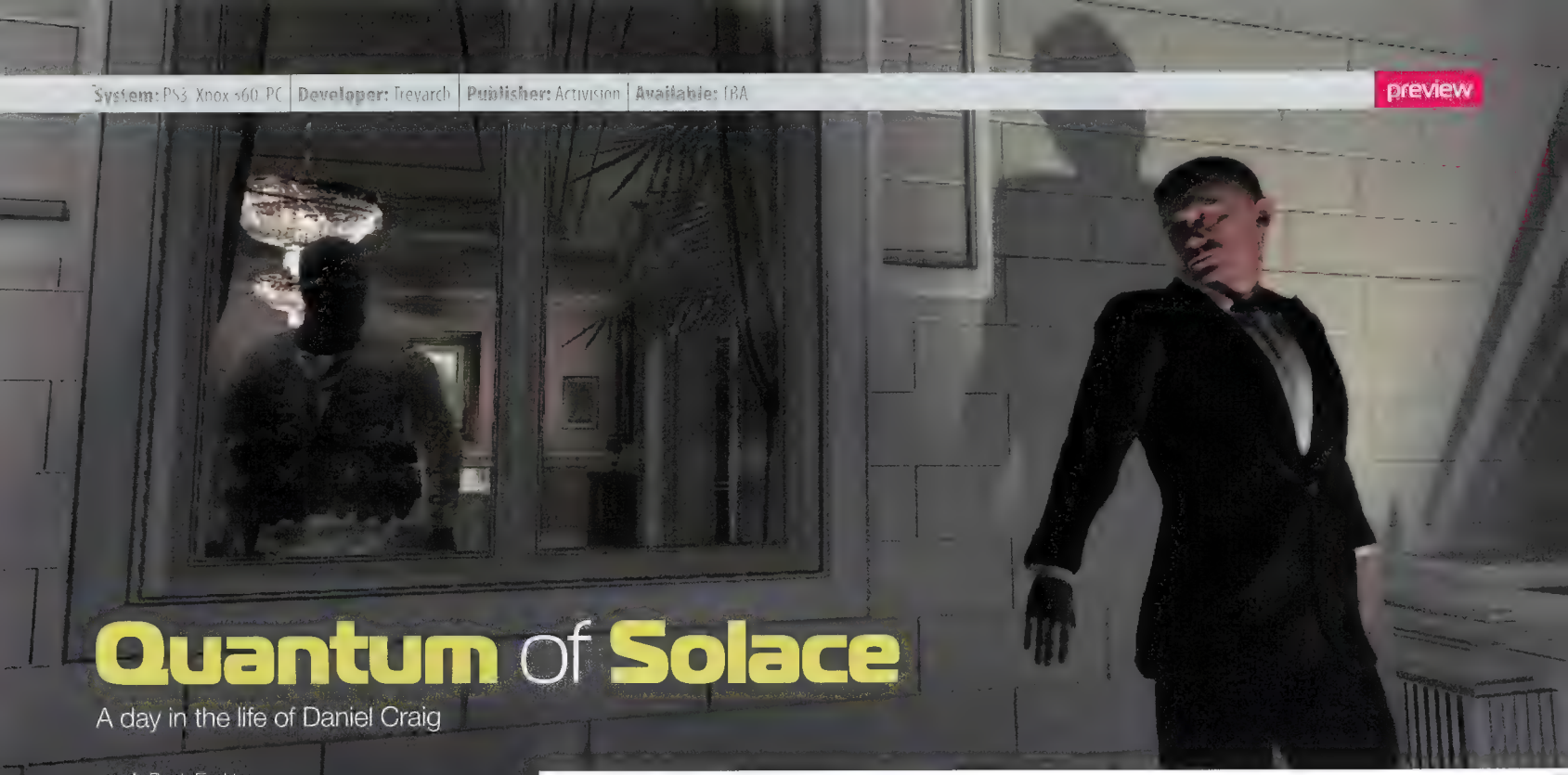
The story is set 10 years after the original NES game. Nathan "Rad" Spencer (voiced by Mike Patton, the former lead singer of Faith No More...uh, what?) has been betrayed by his own government and is being sentenced to death. Lucky for him, a terrorist organization has chosen the day of his execution to unleash a new type of weapon on Ascension City—and the government that chose to execute Spencer now has to ask for his help. As if the Russians invaded Afghanistan, and we were forced to look up Osama's old phone number again. Okay, not really. We'd probably give our guns to some other religious zealot.

Spencer can use his arm as a weapon both by attaching it to barrels and launching them at the enemy or grapple-attaching to enemies and zipping toward them with a bionic kick. Players can also look forward to a large array of projectile weapons, like rocket launchers that target multiple antagonists or vicious automatic Drayton AA-9 anti-armor guns.

It seems like all games come with a multiplayer mode these days, and Commando is no exception. In the death-match prequel that's included in BC, players take the roles of test subjects working with the grappling hook prototype. Speed is a key to success in the versus mode, and watching another player zip across the skyline really gives some perspective on how fast Spencer travels in the single-player campaign. Of course, the speed comes at a price—faster players are easier to spot, as the arc of their swing is larger.

Screenshots don't do the engine justice—the effect of wind on Spencer's clothing as he tears across the skyline is just one of the details that Grin has included to give the game a sense of flight. Furthermore, the landscape is awash with color, and visual cues tie the game in to the NES original. I really appreciate that sort of thing in a sequel. Look for this one in the fall.

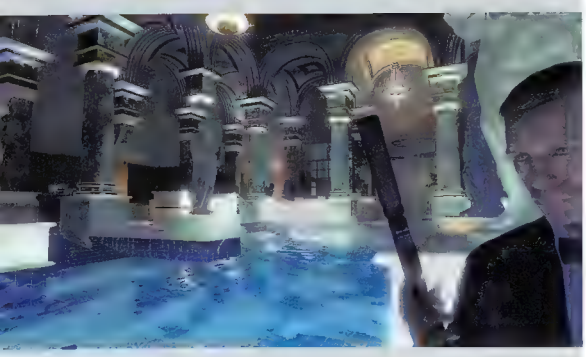




Quantum of Solace

A day in the life of Daniel Craig

words Brady Fiechter



Quantum of Solace executive producer Garret Young is stoked. This first Bond game in quite a long time is about to make its debut, played out live on a giant theater screen in the nicely chilled screening room in the center of Treyarch's Santa Monica studios. Young expresses how excited he is, as a fan of *007*, to be working with an ostensibly enthusiastic Daniel Craig in the lead—looking extremely good indeed in his gaming debut—and how excited the team is to be crafting a game that, they feel, is a pretty firm step beyond what you might typically have in mind for a game based on Bond.

Yes, the expression of "excitement" has been dropped a number of times before Quantum of Solace the game has its own chance for validation, but before the exciting killing begins, it is noted by studio head Mark Lamia that the game is running off the Call of Duty 4 engine: "The synergies cannot be understated, having two teams actually working inside of that technology and the learning that [comes with that]...being able to leverage that across multiple projects." Because of the robust technology afforded the team, Young added, "We're able to do things that other games aren't doing right now."

You see signs of the Call of Duty 4 engine right away: the strong lighting tones, the crisp gloss to the aesthetic. Beyond the technical trimmings, the game borrows set pieces from the last Bond movie and tracks several areas from the upcoming *Quantum of Solace*. As lead environment artist Manny Salazar pointed out, the team took its own liberties with certain scenes to make them more game friendly and visually appealing as an interactive space. A big standout is a chase through a construction site, culminating in a balancing act over a high-rise skeleton.

One interesting note: a scene that was dropped from *Casino Royale* actually served as inspiration for an expanded level in the game.

The game opens loud and urgent, as an opera house in Venice collapses around Bond's rush to safety. You can play the game in the first person—Young talked about how focus tests confirmed the demand to play through Bond's eyes—but movement is also encouraged in the third person, particularly when coming up to cover points or moments of reprieve and exploration. It was promising to see Bond take time out from the shooting sprees to shimmy across ledges overlooking the city and take the more quiet approach to his exploits. Context-sensitive attacks also come into play; for example, slink behind an enemy, press the corresponding button and watch a hard takedown.

Taking us through the story timeline, Young explained that *Quantum of Solace* is actually the first true sequel in the Bond franchise, taking place an hour after the events in *Casino Royale*. The game follows the arc of both films, explaining "how Bond became Bond." The story takes you through exotic open spaces and tight, indoor settings, where the gameplay will change accordingly.

The best secret agents take head shots.

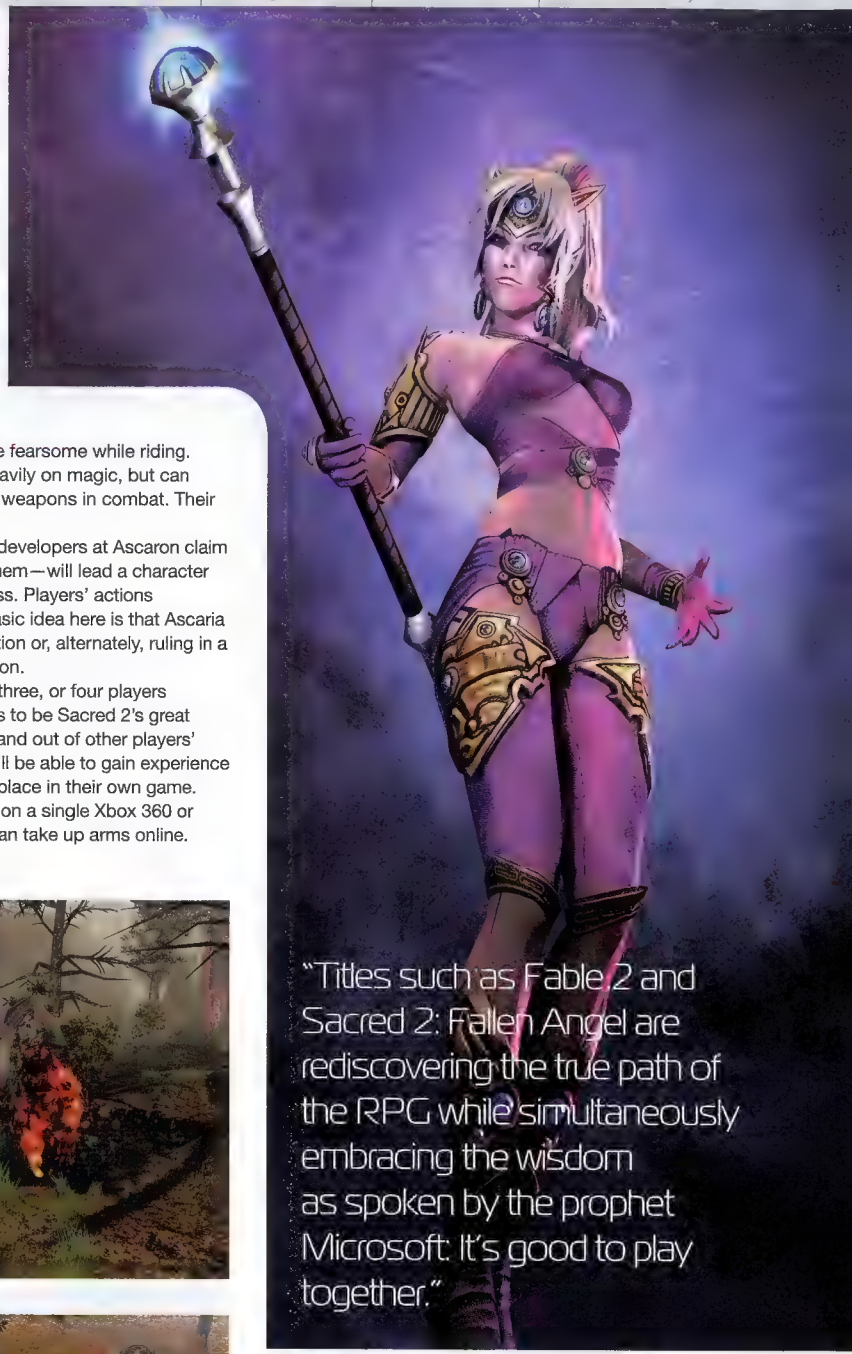
> "We're able to do things that other games aren't doing right now."

System: PC, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Nintendo DS | **Developer:** Ubisoft | **Publisher:** Ubisoft | **Available:** Holidays 2008

Sacred 2 Fallen Angel

Straight Outta Ancaria

words Greg Orlando



It's nice to see role-playing games getting with the program. For years, RPGs have been thoroughly single-player fare, despite having roots in pen-and-paper games that are only played cooperatively. Now, titles such as Fable 2 and Sacred 2: Fallen Angel are rediscovering the true path of the RPG while simultaneously embracing the wisdom as spoken by the prophet Microsoft: It's good to play together.

Fallen Angel is a prequel to the original, PC-exclusive Sacred. It takes place some 2,000 years before the events of Sacred, and the plotlines are only minimally connected—if at all—so as not to frighten away new players.

Sacred 2's world of Ancaria stretches 22 square miles, and the developers claim it will take six hours of uninterrupted walking for a character to clear that distance. This vast world can be spanned in much less time, however, on the back of a beast or by using the many teleport chambers that are scattered about.

An action-heavy RPG, Sacred 2 offers six playable character types, four of which are available at the game's start. To date, game publisher CDV has announced three of the six types, and players can opt to be a seraphim, shadow warrior, or high elf. These archetypes can then be personalized; players allocate points to different skills in order to augment a character's abilities. In this way, it's possible to personalize a hero—something that's absolutely essential, since Sacred 2 allows for four-player adventuring via Xbox Live or the PlayStation network.

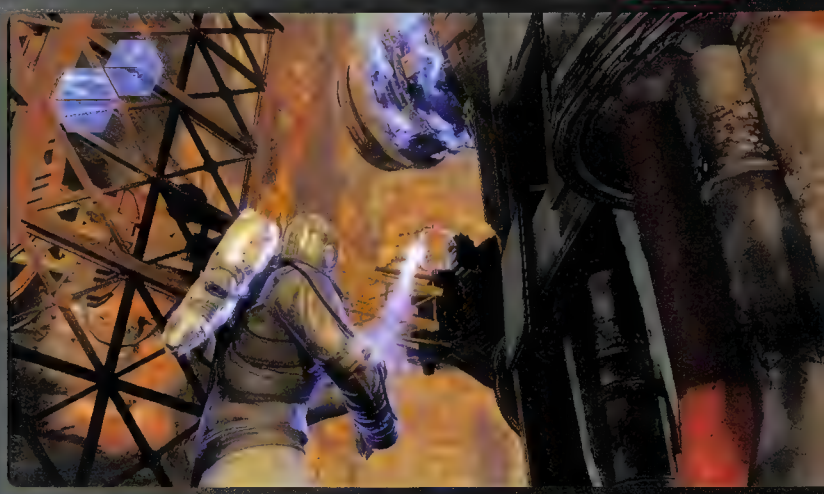
Although the game offers few starting choices for a new character, the revealed classes show a good deal of differentiation among them. High elves tend toward the manipulation of nature, and can attack foes with heat or cold. Shadow warriors can tap into the underworld to summon up undead allies and ride on armored hellhounds. Their natural inclination is for powerful melee attacks, and they're even more fearsome while riding. Angelic seraphim rely more heavily on magic, but can also employ special high-tech weapons in combat. Their special mount is a tiger.

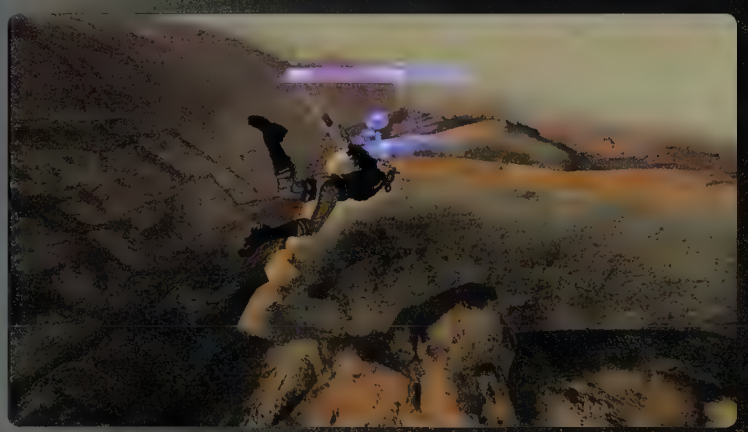
Individual quests—and the developers at Ascaron claim Sacred 2 holds about 180 of them—will lead a character down a path of light or darkness. Players' actions determine the path, and the basic idea here is that Ascaria wants either saving or destruction or, alternately, ruling in a benevolent or malevolent fashion.

Multiplayer action lets two, three, or four players adventure together. This seems to be Sacred 2's great draw, and players can drop in and out of other players' games at will. In this way, they'll be able to gain experience and booty without losing their place in their own game. Two players can fight together on a single Xbox 360 or PlayStation 3, and up to four can take up arms online.

"Titles such as Fable 2 and Sacred 2: Fallen Angel are rediscovering the true path of the RPG while simultaneously embracing the wisdom as spoken by the prophet Microsoft: It's good to play together."

Darkvoid





"Leaping upward toward cover that is above him, Will dangles from the side of a cliff and harasses enemies when they poke out their heads."

Heather Campbell

Vertical cover mechanic. That's the big idea behind Dark Void. Three-dimensional games need three-dimensional combat. So give your hero a jet pack and get to shooting above and below you. Dark Void comes from the team that designed Crimson Skies, and you can tell they like flying—which is good, because I like flying, too.

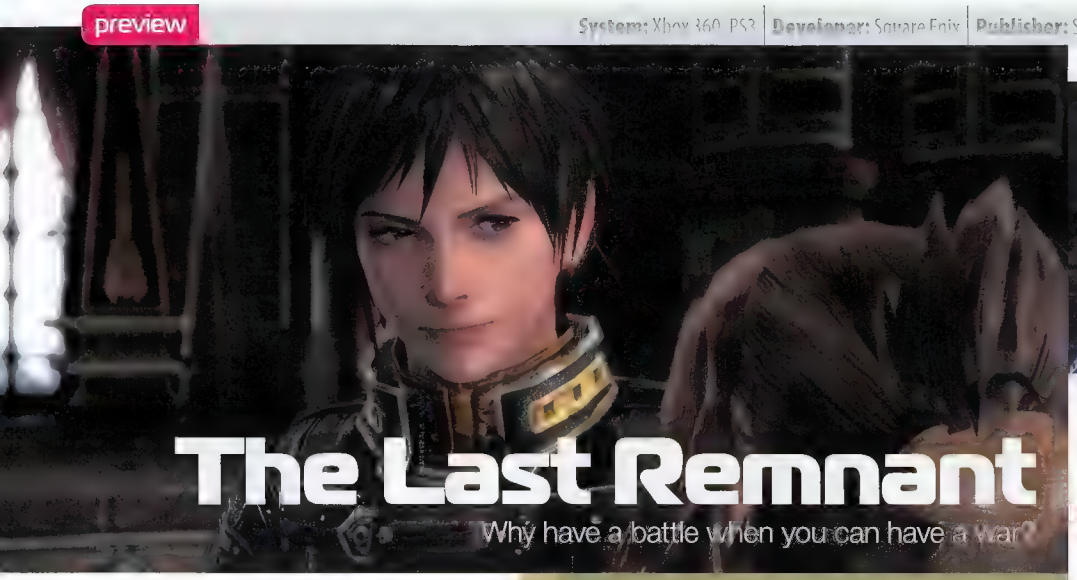
Dark Void is the story of an everyman cargo-plane pilot who ends up fighting aliens called The Watchers after he crash-lands in the Bermuda Triangle. Will is our hero's name, and his instinctive selfishness is going to have to give way to heroism if he wants to make it out alive. After finding a jet pack (Watcher technology retro-engineered by other humans who have come through the same void that swallowed Will), Will learns to fly, gracelessly.

Introduced to the three-dimensional combat in stages, players begin by hovering, and then eventually upgrade to full-on UFO-hijacking, vertical-cover-finding flight. Leaping upward toward cover that is above him, Will dangles from the side of a cliff and harasses enemies when they poke out their heads. Taking a hit means mashing buttons, as Will struggles to get a grip on the cliff face...or falls backward toward the ground.

It sounds disorienting, but despite the *idea* behind vertical cover, graphically, there's little to differentiate it from standard cover mechanics. Without being able to see the ground below Will, it's a little impossible to imagine that he's moving upward. This changes, of course, when Will is free-flying, because you get a true sense of scale when you're zipping around high above the Earth.

The ground combat is Gears of War, Resident Evil 4 style stuff. Pressing a button fixes Will behind cover (presumably, this mechanic is identical when Will is flying, when the cover is above him), and the camera is cinematically mounted beside Will's shoulder. There's a large array of weaponry, of course, and hijacking UFOs means there's some vehicle combat as well. Will's enemies, The Watchers, were disappointingly monotonous blue bad guys in the preview we were shown, but as the game is still more than a year away from release, chances are there will be more types of baddies for Will to fight. The demo team hinted at very large boss battles, more in line with Shadow of the Colossus than anything we'd see in Gears or RE4. Combine that with the flight mechanic, and I'm very interested indeed.

System: Xbox 360, PS3 | Developer: Square Enix | Publisher: Square Enix | ESRB: TBA | Available: Winter 2008 (360), TBA (PS3)



The Last Remnant

Why have a battle when you can have a war?

words Casey Loe

Microsoft has had so much success in securing timed JRPG exclusives for the Xbox 360 that they don't even need to try anymore. Thanks to the problems that have plagued the PS3 releases of seemingly every game running on the Unreal Engine 3.0, only the Xbox 360 version of The Last Remnant will be shipping in 2008. While that may come as sour news to some, we're just happy to see any sort of update at all—Square Enix hadn't released so much as a screenshot in the nine months before the game was shown at Microsoft's RPG Premiere event in Tokyo.

The Last Remnant was supposed to be the first RPG to see a simultaneous release in America, Europe, and Japan, but that record will now be snatched away by Square Enix's own Infinite Undiscovery. Nevertheless, The Last Remnant may still end up *feeling* like the first truly international RPG, as virtually every aspect of the game was developed with Western players in mind. According to the developers, the game's difficulty level has been boosted to satisfy our love of a good challenge. Plus, the character designs were born from an attempt to fuse the style of Japanese manga with American comic books, hero Rush was given a stoic streak in response to complaints that traditional RPG heroes were too mopey, and even the game's title was taken from a list of cool-sounding words prepared by the company's U.S. branch.

While The Last Remnant will contain traditional town visits and dungeon forays, the focus seems to be squarely on combat, with a massive-scale, turn-based battle system that allows players to deploy multiple five-man parties known as "unions." The characters in a union attack individually but form a single unit with combined stats, allowing you to keep weak spell-casters alive by pairing them with tanks to raise their union's total HP. The game currently allows players to field five unions at once, so you'll need more than the usual band of four or five scrappy heroes to get the job done. You can recruit dozens of story line characters from optional quests, or instead fill up your army with redshirts hired at local guilds. With so many characters in battle at once, you won't be expected to micromanage; your troops will choose their own actions based on the orders you assign to their unions—a direct attack at a chosen foe, a defensive posture with heavy use of healing and support spells, or backing up another union, to name a few examples.

So far, everything we've seen of The Last Remnant has focused on either the game's battle system or its intriguing event sequences. The developers have explained almost nothing about how the game is structured and haven't released any images of dungeon or field areas in over a year. The team is also keeping mum on how characters will grow and evolve, only revealing that the game will not use a conventional system of experience points and levels. Hopefully some of these questions will be answered at the upcoming E3 and Tokyo game shows. But if we have to wait till the holiday season to find out what's going on with The Last Remnant, so be it—between Tales of Vesperia, Infinite Undiscovery and Fallout 3, Xbox 360 RPG fans will be almost too busy to care.

"The biggest change is the abundance of side-quests and minigames, which seem to have been increased at least fivefold over the original."

Yakuza 2

Blood, pinstripes, and *okonomiyaki*

words Casey Loe

Two years ago, we pleaded with you to buy Yakuza, but you spurned us. And now Sega's most successful original franchise of the last decade is reduced to a subtitled-only sequel that won't even hit U.S. shores until nearly two years after its original Japanese release. The subtitled-only part isn't necessarily a bad thing—the original Yakuza earned more complaints about the lack of a Japanese VO option than it did praise for its exceptional North American voice casting. But the two-year delay hurts, since it leaves Yakuza 2 to ship on a nearly dead platform and with a visual style that hasn't aged well, especially in the wake of GTA IV.

Fortunately, the series' exceptional storytelling holds up just fine. Yakuza 2 opens with the Tojo Clan in disarray after the year-ago events of the first Yakuza, which has emboldened the rival Omi Alliance of Osaka and left the worlds of organized crime and law enforcement bracing for open clan warfare. Hero Kazuma Kiryu has been tasked with traveling to Osaka and negotiating a truce, which may sound boring, but I assure you, the peace process involves a great many plot twists and rivers of spilled blood. If you're new to the series, you can view a lengthy recap of the first game, but it won't provide much help when minor characters pop in and event scenes start throwing names and organized crime ranks at you in a rapid-fire pace. No matter—the story is still one hell of a barn burner, with event scenes directed with a skilled cinematic eye and plenty of action set pieces that do a fine job of advancing the plot instead of feeling like trivial fetch quests.

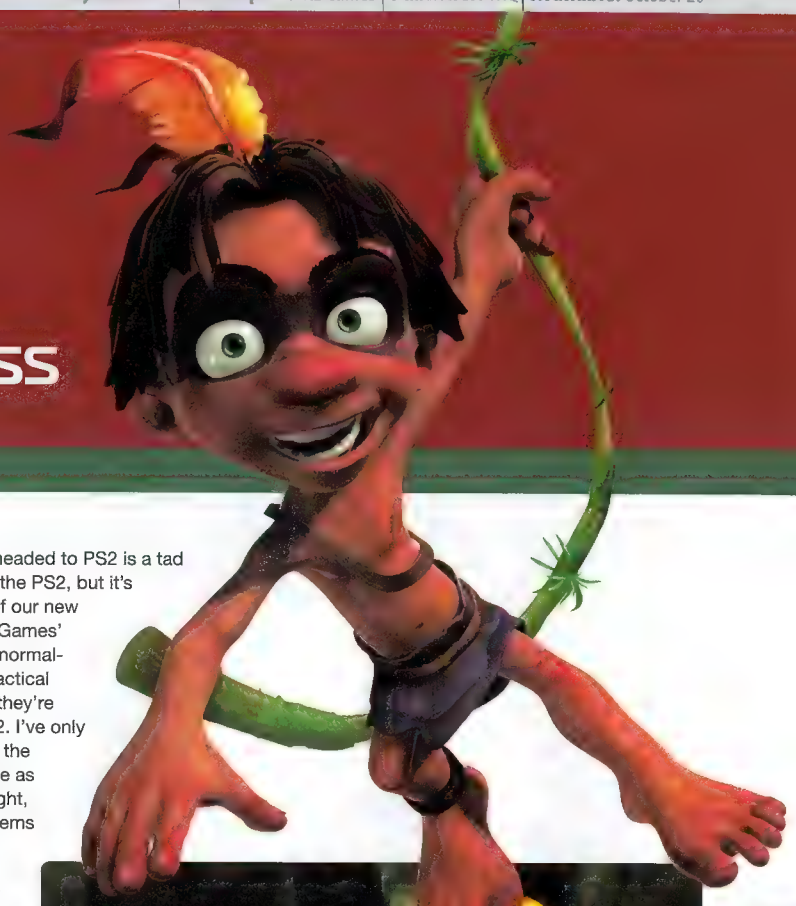
Yakuza 2 was a hastily made sequel with very few changes to the original game's formula. The exploration-event-battle structure of the original Yakuza has been preserved, as has the game's satisfying brawler-style battle system, with a new emphasis on improvised weapons and flashy Heat Attacks. The biggest change is the abundance of side-quests and minigames, which seem to have been increased at least fivefold over the original. The focus on a central narrative still makes Yakuza feel more like an action RPG than a GTA-style sandbox game, but it's easy to spend days without advancing the plot, hunting down petty criminals, playing mah-jongg, chatting up the girls at the cabaret clubs or even taking a job at a host club and being romanced by the ladies yourself. While Yakuza 2 is clearly running on the same engine as Yakuza 1 and recycles many of its assets (it's been a year, Kazuma—maybe it's time to buy a second shirt?), the developers have mostly done away with the long loading times that plagued the first game. But other annoyances remain, like the pointless random encounters with laughably easy foes and the horrendous item management system.

The Yakuza series' few Western fans should find plenty more of what they loved in this by-the-numbers sequel, but if the original game couldn't score a hit with a big-name cast and relatively cutting-edge tech, Yakuza 2's prospects are looking dim indeed. PlayStation 3 owners should pray that a Western release of the exceptional Yakuza 3 isn't contingent on Yakuza 2's sales numbers.

System: Wii | **Developer:** Blitz Games | **Publisher:** THQ | **Available:** October 20

Tak
and the Guardians of Gross

Tak on another sequel!

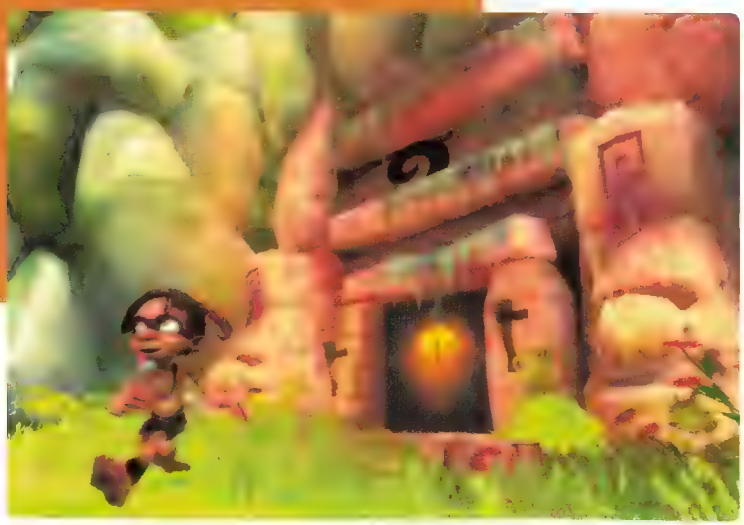


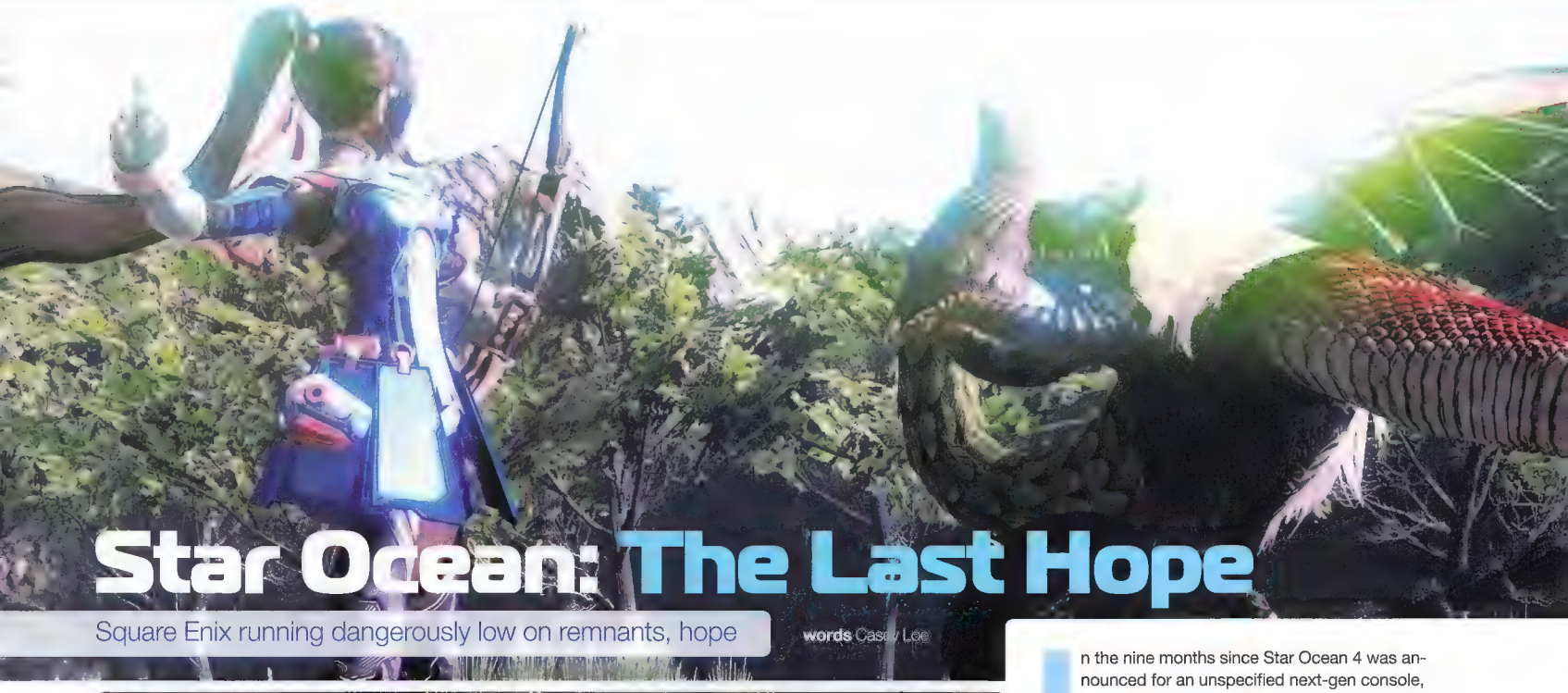
words Dave Halverson

I've always been partial to protagonists of the disproportionate, fur-bearing, or female persuasion, so I jumped on the Pupanunu band-wagon back when Tak was a glimmer in Nickelodeon's eye. Show me a game featuring an old shaman with a head shaped like a potato, villagers turned into sheep, animated voodoo dolls, and a prehistoric geek hero who jumps off cliffs in a chicken suit and I'll show you where my name is written on it. The network's first game not built on one of its existing properties, Nickelodeon put Tak in the care of a little known developer out of Utah, Avalanche Software, back in 2001, and the rest is history. Tak and the Power of Juju for PS2 looked better than most first-party games and what it lacked in dexterity it made up for in originality and scope. Two sequels and a CGI TV show later (look for it on DVD), I knew it was only a matter of time before Tak would ride (or fly if he hung onto that chicken suit) again. The only question was who would do the honors since Avalanche was acquired by Disney in 2005. All I knew was that the Tak universe on "next-gen" console was going to be a thing of beauty...

It was one thing to discover that the new Tak is Wii bound, dashing any visions I had of the game's surreal landscapes bathed in normal mapping and glistening streams, but the fact that it's also headed to PS2 is a tad off-putting. I mean, I'll always love the PS2, but it's time we got what we paid for out of our new consoles. Although the Wii is Blitz Games' lead platform, the lack of any faux normal-mapping, reflective surfaces, or practical water effects makes me wonder if they're limited by having to port to the PS2. I've only played one level though, and while the environment didn't appear as dense as its predecessors, the game feels tight, uses a similar color palette, and seems to be retaining the surreal nuances that have been the hallmark of the series. The gameplay is what really surprised me, beginning with the demise of Tak's heavy-handed physics, replaced by a new far more nimble set of play mechanics. Tak's faster, lighter on his feet, and springier (he even wall runs) and the gameplay is decidedly faster with an emphasis on "Parkour" style rhythmic level traversal. Additional changes to the formula include driving levels—I'll bet gas was cheap B.C.—Tak's gal pal from the TV show, Jeera, as a playable character, and huge bosses called "Grosstrosities" which Tak must jump, climb, and run over. Sounds Shadow of Colossus-ish—Careful now.

"I knew it was only a matter of time before Tak would ride (or fly if he hung onto that chicken suit) again...."

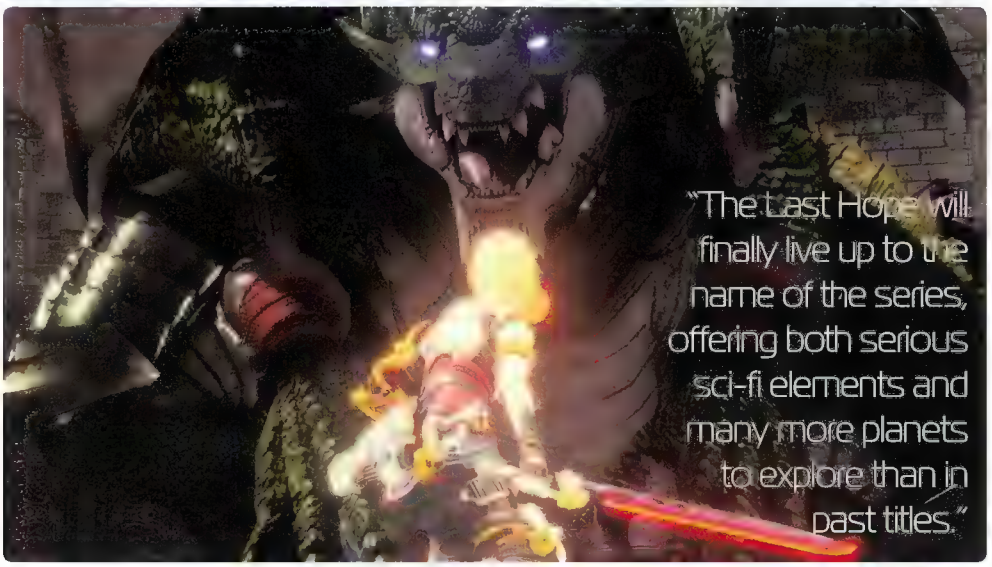




Star Ocean: The Last Hope

Square Enix running dangerously low on remnants, hope

words Casey Loe


"The Last Hope will finally live up to the name of the series, offering both serious sci-fi elements and many more planets to explore than in past titles."

In the nine months since Star Ocean 4 was announced for an unspecified next-gen console, speculation has been running wild. It certainly didn't help that the developers did interviews with both Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 exclusive magazines while saying the game was in development for only a single platform. We may never know what tipped the balance—a duffel bag full of cash, a family pet held at gunpoint, or perhaps the marriage of a homely daughter to a top executive—but somehow Microsoft won, and Star Ocean 4 will be a timed Xbox 360 exclusive. (Officially, it "may never come out on PS3," says producer Yoshinori Yamagishi, but I think everyone knows how this works by now.)

Star Ocean: The Last Hope takes place centuries before even Star Ocean 1, at the dawn of space exploration. (As with previous installments, Star Ocean: The Last Hope will probably not be numbered in North America, as the "4" is currently only in the Japanese text of the logo.) The Last Hope tells the tale of mankind's search for new worlds in which to live, and the subtitle is likely a reference to the importance of the heroes' mission in the wake of the cataclysmic World War of 2063. The developers have promised that hero Edge Maverick's journey of exploration will finally live up to the name of the series, offering both serious sci-fi elements and many more planets to explore than the two or three of past titles. No word yet on how this Star Ocean origin story will fit in with the credibility-destroying—I mean, um, "controversial"—twist at the end of Star Ocean: Till the End of Time.

The Last Hope's combat system is based on the one used in Star Ocean 3, but the defensive system introduced in that installment, in which you could block weak attacks while standing still, has been scrapped in favor of a new combat mechanic that has yet to be revealed. You'll also be fielding parties of four characters again, up from the three in Till the End of Time. Outside of battle, the game's deep item-creation system is set to return, but with the amount of items and the level of complexity toned down considerably. The game will feature both real-time and prerendered CG event scenes, the latter by Square Enix's Visual Works group (of Final Fantasy fame), who are working on the Star Ocean series for the first time.

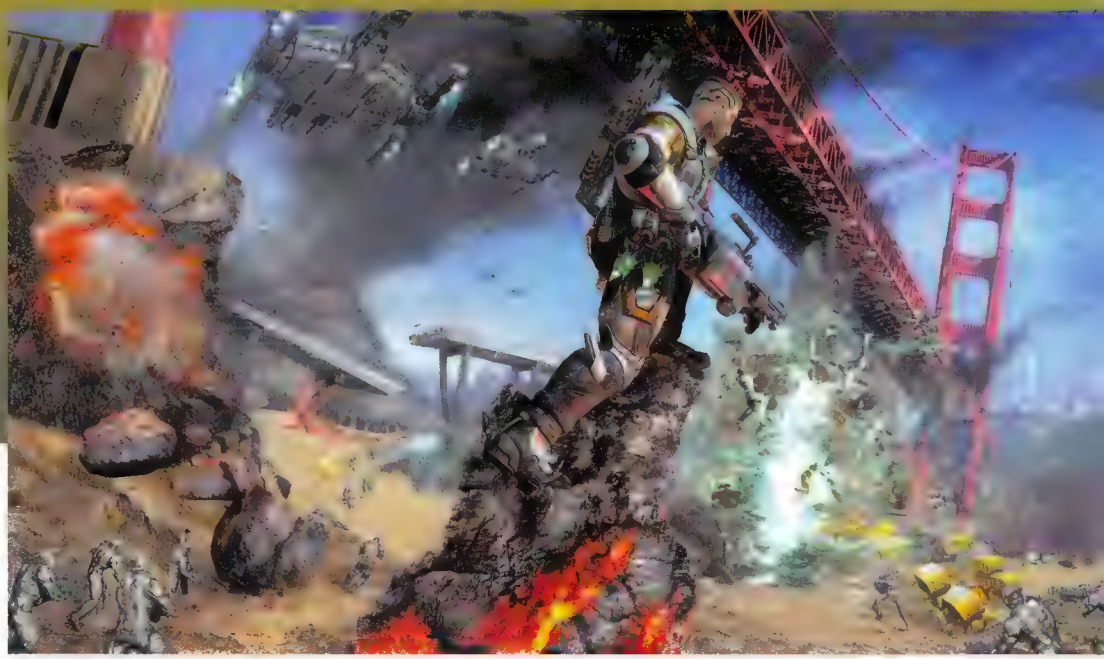
That's all that's known about The Last Hope at the moment, and with a 2009 release date, it's doubtful we'll learn more before October's Tokyo Game Show. By then Infinite Undiscovery will be out the door, and tri-Ace can shift their focus from the moon to the stars.

System: XXXXX | **Developer:** Day 1 Studios | **Publisher:** Lucasarts | **Multi:** Yes | **ESRB:** XXXXX | **Available:** October 7

Fracture

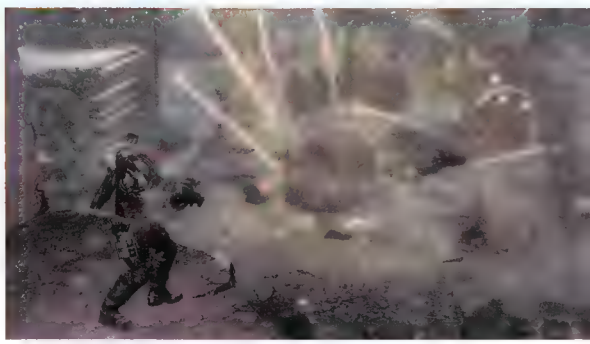
Groundbreaking gameplay

words Heather Campbell

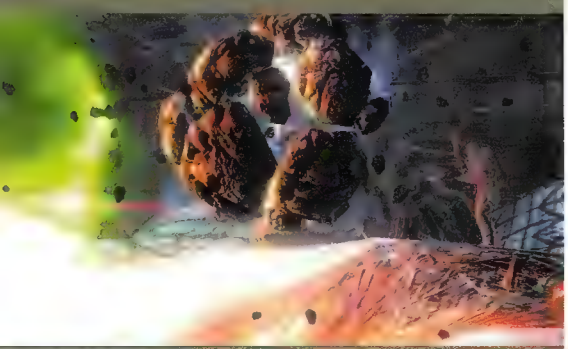


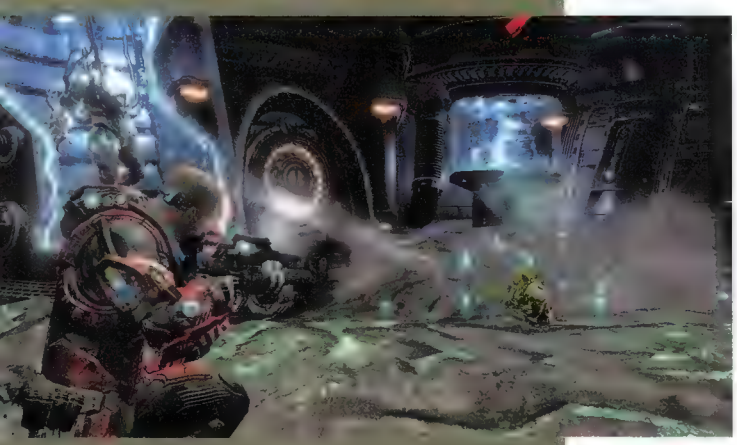
Fracture may not have that certain pop when it comes to screenshots—I mean, let's face it, everyone is doing this gritty sci-fi, camera-on-the-right-shoulder-thing now—but what it does have going for it is a complex, involved backstory that compensates for its now-familiar look. Couple that with an interesting core mechanic and you've got a game that may be a little tired on the eyes, but hopefully will ignite our attention.

Taking place in the year 2161, the story of Fracture is a cautionary tale of science at the expense of humanity. After the ice caps melt, America's landscape is rendered unrecognizable. Westerners focus their resources on the development of genetic research, while the East continues down a path of technological advancement. As more and more environmental tragedies befall the U.S., the country finds itself split in two. War follows on the heels of disaster, as each half of America becomes the frontline of futuristic warfare. The Pacificans are near unrecognizable, genetically enhanced super-soldiers, while the Atlantic Alliance are techno-savvy recruits who use landscape-altering weapons to carve out an advantage. And in the middle of all of it is you, cybernetic soldier Jet Brody, the Atlantic Alliance demolitions expert.



The special effects hit strong and often.





Fracture brings a new concept to the cover-mechanic gameplay we've seen so much of lately. Instead of snapping Jet onto cover that clutters the field, players raise and lower the terrain with his weaponry to craft cover where once there was none. Taking on Pacificans, Brody can either inflate the ground in front of him or crush the ground beneath his enemies' feet to throw antagonists off balance. Battle is frantic, uneven and improvised—and since players can redesign levels as they play them, each game is unique. In a way, the game's main weapon can function a bit like the gun of Portal, in that attacking enemies can be completely indirect, a result of how you employ your environment.

Deforming the terrain isn't just a way to fight; it's also a puzzle-solving feature of the game, as Brody is forced to use the landscape, literally. Physics-based puzzles (crushing objects under overhangs) and platform creation (forming staircases out of the earth to reach higher architecture) are just a couple ways that Brody has to use his gun to get out of environmental predicaments.

"Battle is frantic, uneven and improvised—and since players can redesign levels as they play them, each game is unique."

Hopefully, the game will showcase its engaging backstory within the context of play. Telling the tale of America's demise in-game would be a very immediate way of setting Fracture apart from a slew of other sci-fi shooters.

Facebreaker

All punched out

words: Greg Orlando

You could have your face broken. Thank Electronic Arts for that.

FaceBreaker harkens back to such gloriously goofy boxing games as Punch-Out! And Ready 2 Rumble Boxing. It offers 12 goofy pugilists and the ability to win a fight in oh, say, a whopping eight seconds.

The Marquis of Queensbury is turning over in his grave. Fighters in the game can level devastating high and low punches at their foes or, simply, whack them in the groin with a well-placed foot. As FaceBreaker has no referee, this is a perfectly acceptable tactic. Decisions, too, are for wusses; FaceBreaker only recognizes victory after three knockdowns or a brawl-ending FaceBreaker attack. If no winner is decided by the fight's end, things go to sudden death.

Things look overtly simple with FaceBreaker. It is, after all, an arcade-style boxing title. The game does lend itself to frantic button mashing, and it is entirely possible to dispatch a foe without getting hit in return. Yet there is a depth to the proceedings, and fighters can execute smart strategy to beat skilled enemies. Dodges and parries allow players to avoid or counter enemy attacks. Dash attacks let a fighter strike from a distance, and fighters can string together two weak attacks with a powerful hit to create a "bone breaker," a disorienting blow that often knocks a foe into the air, opening him up for a free hit. Throws can disrupt combination hits or get a fighter out of a dangerous situation in the boxing ring's corner. Each fighter has his own stunning hit, too, and landing a successful one ensures a dazed opponent and a free beating of such.

FaceBreaker comes with a dozen tongue-in-cheek male and female fighters. Voodoo is, well, a shaman with white paint on his face and skulls on his glove. Steve, a fat-bodied ninja, performs a comical martial arts FaceBreaking attack by knocking a foe to his knees and then lightly touching the back of the fallen foe's head. The Bald Bull-esque bruiser Molotov comes into the ring wearing dynamite strapped to his waist. Each of these pugilists' mugs can be captured as a trophy by beating them with a FaceBreaker attack, and players can insert themselves into the proceedings, too. FaceBreaker allows for camera support; players can scan in their own faces and then build their own boxer based on a series of templates.

"FaceBreaker only recognizes victory after three knockdowns or a brawl-ending FaceBreaker."

Fight Night, this is not. And that is not a bad thing, not at all.

System: PS3, 360 | Developer: Lucasarts | Publisher: Lucasarts | Available: September 16

Star Wars: The Force Unleashed

Don't Force it

words Heather Campbell

There was a time in the development of *Star Wars* where Luke's last name was Starkiller. I'm sure you already knew that, if you care enough about *Star Wars* to be reading this article. You know, my interest in projects is piqued when they have a reverence for their legacy, and *Star Wars* multimedia productions fit this bill more than almost anything.

It makes me smile that Vader's secret apprentice in The Force Unleashed is named Starkiller. It feels like a fragment of a lost legend, like we misheard the details in the past and now things are being clarified. I wonder if this Sith's first name is going to turn out to be Deak. Perhaps one of the endings of the game connects the trilogies to the original draft of *The Star Wars*, in which a great Jedi named Starkiller is fighting back against the Empire. That would be something.

Ah, conjecture.

The Force Unleashed is a game that takes place between Episodes III and IV, and tells the story of Vader's attempt to extinguish the Jedi completely. Employing his apprentice (whose backhanded stance is a designer's way of visually featuring the lightsaber onscreen), Vader sends Starkiller across the galaxy to hunt down and destroy the fugitive Jedi. By the time the game is finished, Starkiller's Force prowess outpaces Vader's own; the Sith prodigy can use Force Lightning in ways we've never seen.

The game opens on the Wookie planet Kashyyyk and players get a short opportunity to play as Vader (who, for the purposes of videogameyness,

> "By the time the game is finished, Starkiller's Force prowess outpaces Vader's own..."

demonstrates new powers that he doesn't have in the original trilogy). Accompanied by classic music by John Williams as well as new cues written by the game's composer, Vader hunts down a Jedi in hiding, only to discover a child who is extremely strong with the Force.

The glory in the game isn't lightsaber combat, though there are plenty of combos to unleash on enemies. No, one only has to look at the box to see what Lucasarts is focused on. See how the word "Force" is larger than everything else? That should give you a clue. This is a game about wielding the Force, and the title uses a robust physics and AI engine to do so. Nearly every object in the environment can be manipulated, whether it be the bending of support beams to knock ships out of the air, throwing debris around the environment, or picking up enemies themselves to crush and toss away. Panicked Wookies and stormtroopers grab at each other or their environment in an effort to save themselves, but once you've got someone in your invisible grasp, their flailing desperation most often leads to laughs.

With some version of The Force Unleashed hitting every system that's still being played—including the N-Gage—you're sure to feel the Force in some way or another this fall.

System: PS2, PS3, Wii, NDS | **Dev:** System 3 | **Pub:** Activision | **Available:** August

Ferrari Challenge: Trofeo Pirelli

A hardcore racing simulator, Ferrari Challenge won't suffer fools—unless, of course, they have racing assists on.

Challenge offers more than 50 cars and 15 tracks. The game rides on the strength of its realism: the tracks are licensed, the cars are real-world (and suffer damage), the environmental effects are true-to-life down to the direction of rain beading when a car hits reverse, and the vehicle handling has been translated from driving sessions done by a racing pro. Developer System 3's CEO Mark Cale is dead serious about challenging Gran Turismo for the racing game throne, and may have built the game to ascend it. **Greg Orlando**

System: PS3, Xbox 360 | **Dev:** Rockstar Games | **Pub:** Rockstar Games | **Available:** September

Midnight Club: Los Angeles

Groucho Marx would not tolerate, nor join, any club that would have him as a member.

Exceptions would have been made for the Midnight Club.

A slick and beautiful racer, Midnight Club: Los Angeles travels to the land of smog and clogged highways for its fourth venture into street racing. This time around, load times have been eliminated, the developers claim, and a very nice day-and-night cycle has been added. Drivers eating weaksauce for three square meals a day will be glad to know, too, Rockstar hasn't forsaken them: it's possible to win points and reputation just for completing races. **Greg Orlando**

System: Wii | **Dev:** Cing Inc. | **Pub:** XSEED | **Available:** Q4 2008

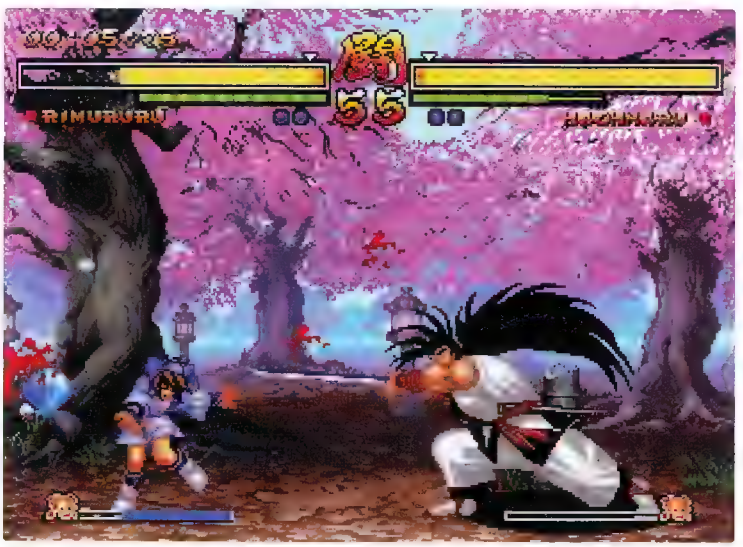
Little King's Story

What happens when a timid young boy stumbles upon a mysterious crown that gives him the ability to charm anyone he wants into following his orders? Well, it's complicated actually. All we know is that young Corobo leaves his village as a kid and returns a king; then goes on a quest to turn his small hamlet into a vast kingdom. The gameplay in Little King's Story combines life-simulation, real-time-strategy and adventure, managing the townspeople, building up the kingdom and when necessary conquering rivals to unify your new empire. Set within a story book world filled with lyrical music and a highly stylized fairytale look Little King's Story is definitely high on the list of Wii games to watch. **Dave Halverson**

System: PS2, PSP, Wii | **Dev:** SNK Playmore | **Pub:** SNK Playmore USA | **Available:** Q4 2008

Samurai Shodown Anthology

Let's be honest here: SNK brought to this world the definitive weapon-based 2D fighting game series, and it was known as Last Blade. But while its later days may have existed in the shadow of its spunky younger sibling, Samurai Shodown is still a landmark series and one of SNK's most beloved franchises. To give the games their due, SNK Playmore has put together Samurai Shodown Anthology, offering up all seven of the major SamSho chapters, which includes the first ever release of Samurai Shodown VI on these shores. The Fatal Fury and Art of Fighting collections were nice, but this–along with the upcoming KOF collection–are what we've all been waiting for. **Eric L. Patterson**



System: PC, Xbox 360, PS3 | **Developer:** Liquid Entertainment | **Publisher:** Codemasters | **Multi:** No, *Not Yet* | **Available:** September 2008

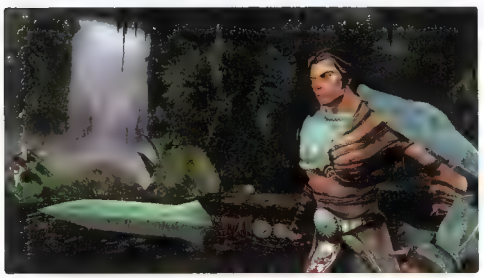
Rise of the Argonauts

300, what have you wrought?

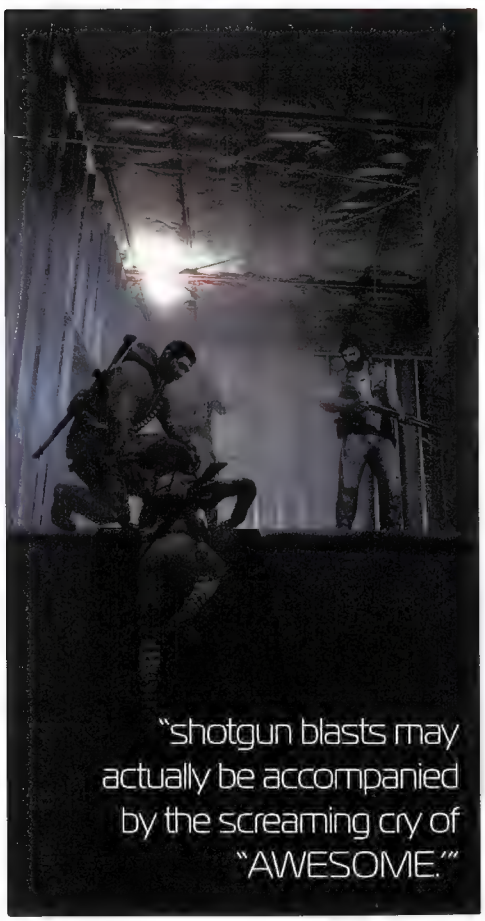
Rise of the Argonauts, despite having no numbers to crunch, no turn-based fight sequences, menu-junctioning, or laborious equipment sequences ... is an RPG. You play as Jason, the greek king -- only, instead of being a selfish thief who exploits the people around him, the story has been rewritten as the noble tale of a man bent on avenging the death of his wife.

Jason employs the help of the Argonauts (Hercules, Achilles, Atalanta, Pan, and others), and sets out to find the Golden Fleece in order to bring his wife back from the dead. Battle damage shows up on characters, lengthy dialogue sequences play out in town, and the story is flavored by the sidekicks you choose to bring on your adventure. Pan loves lore, so he'll talk about an area's history, for example.

Players dedicate actions to different gods in order to "level-up" skills. Again, there are no numbers here, so the leveling comes in the form of new abilities. The developers were eager to stress that there is no 'correct' way to play, and that every player's path will be unique. Jason can switch weapons on the fly, and combat with enemies is not pre-scripted, but rather physics-based. An open world, inventive combat scenarios, and no hud? Sounds like an immersive title. **Heather Campbell**



"...the story has been rewritten as the noble tale of a man bent on avenging the death of his wife."



"shotgun blasts may actually be accompanied by the screaming cry of "AWESOME.""

System: PC, Xbox 360 | **Developer:** Valve | **Publisher:** EA | **Available:** November 4, 2008

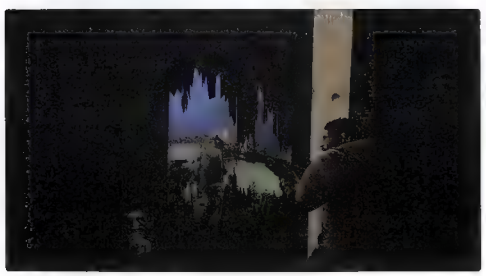
Left 4 Dead

Rise up

Left 4 Dead is a co-operative, first-person zombie infestation action game. Players choose either an outbreak survivor or an infected zombie; teams of four hold off a zombie raid or die at the grimy hands of the brain-famished undead. I'm not sure, but shotgun blasts may actually be accompanied by the screaming cry of "AWESOME" ... or that might have been going off in my head.

One of the sweetest features was tag-team medical help; a player who gets knocked down can shoot until he's dead ... and then be brought back to life by a med-kit carrying buddy. Players can see each others' outlines through walls, to make rescue and assistance easier.

The 360 release will feature both Live and Split-Screen co-op play, meaning you can bring your friends over for some in-room zombie killing. If players choose instead to inhabit the frenzied, rabies-infected zombies, they take on the roles of zombie bosses, who have unique powers to help them set up mass raids at certain junctions. Each player-controlled character has a unique look and personality, and hopefully this will translate into some unique AI sidekicks if you can't find someone to play with you. Look for this game *in my 360*, come November. **Heather Campbell**



System: Wii | **Developer:** High Voltage Software | **Publisher:** TBA | **Available:** Q1 2009

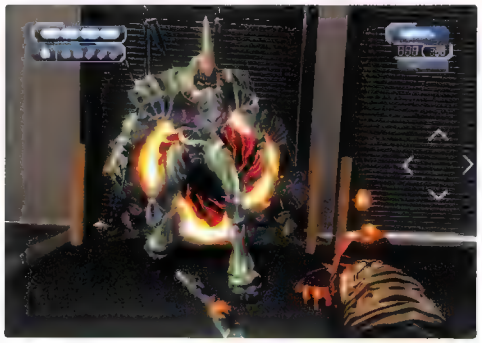
The Conduit

A Quantum leap?

High Voltage Software wants to change the way people think about the Wii, and the game they're going to do it with is The Conduit, the first game to utilize their proprietary Quantum 3 Engine technology.

We got a look at the Quantum 3 engine in action during GDC and it was indeed impressive. Even in its early state The Conduit, which isn't due until Q1 2009, looked remarkably better than the vast majority of 3D Wii games by way of dynamic environment mapping, interactive water with real-time reflection, and four-stage texture composition including gloss, diffuse, and bump mapping (all really good things). The game itself—a sci-fi FPS with both online multiplayer and single player campaign components—features advanced AI, a deep storyline heavy on conspiracy, and aliens...lots and lots of aliens. They're also seeing to it that the controls are as thought-through as the visuals, through comprehensive firearms mastery and the "All Seeing Eye" used to do everything from solve puzzles and mysteries to take down some of those aliens. **Dave Halverson**

"High Voltage Software wants to change the way people think about the Wii..."



System: Wii, NDS, PC | **Dev:** Legacy Interactive | **Pub:** SouthPeak Interactive | **Available:** Sept

Igor: The Game

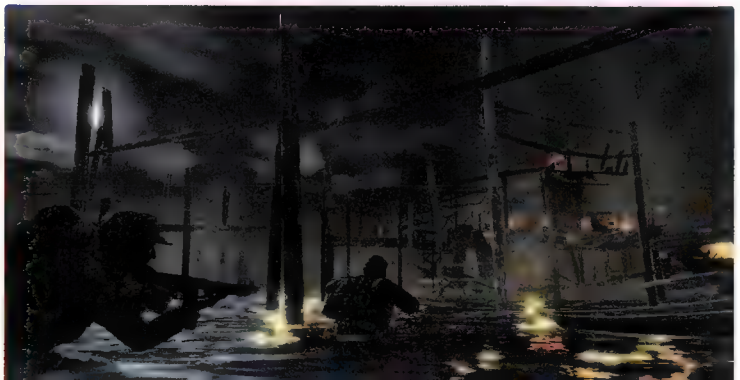
Guess what? John Cusack is doing an animated feature. Yep, he's playing Igor, the ugly little hunchback lab assistant that gets kicked around in all those monster movies. What happens is one day this Igor gets it in his head that instead of serving a mad scientist, he should be a mad scientist by winning the Evil Science Fair. I always wondered how mad scientists became mad scientists. Guess what? Steve Buscemi's in it too. Yeah, the bug-eyed guy. Now, he looks more like an Igor. Guess what else? They're making a game too. Yeah, you need one of those Wii thingy's though. You got one of them Wii's? You get to pick a character from the movie and then like fight and do stuff. Guess what? Four people can play it at once. You should get one of them Wiis. **Dave Halverson**

"I always wondered how mad scientists became mad scientists."

System: 360, PS3, PC | **Dev:** Treyarch | **Pub:** Activision | **Available:** October

Call of Duty World at War

That Call of Duty World at War (Call of Duty 5 for short) uses the awesome Call of Duty 4 engine is not a bad start. That the game is once again exploring World War II themes and settings is... well, it is a point Treyarch has already begun discussing with the knowledge that they have a lot to prove. Their last work on this series, CoD 3, was solid, but Treyarch admits they had a precariously tight production schedule that has been liberated this time out. Looks uncharacteristically violent too. **Brady Fiechter**



Dave Halverson
PUBLISHER

Modus Operandi: I don't take reviewing games lightly—no siree. I get deep into a game in accord with the audience the developer is aiming to gratify, and then review from that perspective with an eye on design, artistry, animation, attention to detail, physics, audio, and functionality.

Brain Drain: If there's ever been a film that everyone in the world should see it's *Wall-E* (Wal-Mart is probably developing food-in-a-cup as we speak) and if there's ever been a game that every gamer should play it's Metal Gear Solid 4. To not play it is to not know what's possible. I'm no MGS die-hard and I've never been so awestruck and completely humbled. And finally, calling all rockers: You need the new Alter-Bridge (*Blackbird*).

Game of the Month: Wario Shake

Brady Fiechter
EDITOR IN CHIEF

Modus Operandi: There is no checklist for reviewing a game. The best game feels right from the start, and the best game is not concerned with feature sets as much as how each component is handled. If the visual space is not compelling in some way, the gameplay better be so good that it's Tetris (which offers an incredibly interesting visual space).

Brain Drain: Am I the only one who doesn't care about achievements or this new PlayStation trophy stuff? Come on: can you really feel good about accusing Wall-E of having an agenda? Does anyone seriously look forward to another World War II-themed game? Is it OK to like the new Coldplay album?

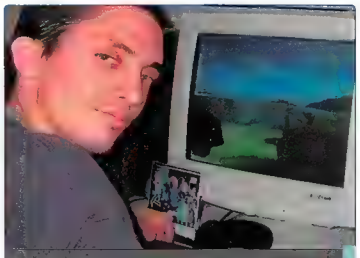
Game of the Month: Metal Gear Solid 4

Greg Orlando
SENIOR EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Here's the way of it: a game can be fun, but not good, and good, but not fun. The two really are mutually exclusive; if it wasn't the case, Mutant League Football would score a 12 out of 10 and Silent Hill 2 would score a 4 out of 14. Thank god Play eliminated its scores. Also, Greg is counting the days until the installation of Reviewatron 4125, which will finally be able to suggest that fans of the genre should, in fact, like a particular game while all others should try before they buy—in 10 different languages!

Brain Drain: *Wall-E* was a wonderful movie. The New York Mets are officially the Bad News Bears of Feel-Good New York teams.

Game of the Month: Civilization: Revolution



Mike Griffin
PC EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I'm looking for convincing themes I can feel and considered polish I can respect, regardless of a game's scope or platform. I absolutely believe that games can be considered art, and a lot of great art requires a technical understanding of the canvas, instruments and stage. That's a balance I care about in a medium whose MO is interactivity. Interface is also very important to me, as it can crucially impede or compliment the flow of ideas that a game is attempting to communicate.
Brain Drain: Cinder me timbers... Maybe Valve will have patched it by the time this hits, but for now I'm going to call shenanigans on the new Pyro achievement unlocks in Team Fortress 2. Wonky backstab code + flame splash radius = Backburner overkill!

Game of the Month: Devil May Cry 4 PC

Nick Des Barres
JAPAN EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Hideo Kojima may not agree with me, but I believe videogames can be art. Although I have been writing about them for 14 years, never have I felt comfortable assigning numerical scores; there exist no universal, pan-human criteria against one can judge works of art. The most a critic can aspire to is describing, with as much eloquence as he can muster, how the work in question makes him feel. That is my goal when I review a game.
Brain Drain: Metal Gear Solid 4's localization. For the first time in my life, I played an MGS in English prior to Japanese, and I thought the localization was superb. But after experiencing the game in its original language, I was left dumbstruck by the discrepancy in overall nuance. More on this next month...

Game of the Month: Metal Gear Solid 4

Casey Loe
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I couldn't be happier that we've done away with review scores. It's ridiculous to believe that there's some objective standard of quality that covers the opinions of every person who plays games. That said, I will miss dishing out the 3.5's, because a good reaming just isn't the same without some arbitrarily low score at the end.

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Game of the Month: Etrian Odyssey II

ERIC L PATTERSON
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I come from the angle that games can always be fixed and/or improved in some way, that games should be about making the player happy, not the developer, and if a game is multiplayer, it should be online, period. I'll forgive a game's flaws if it is an enjoyable experience, but I wish the small user-centered details weren't so often overlooked.

Brain Drain: Mega Man 9 is going to basically be a digitally distributed NES game. Capcom, if I haven't told you lately, I love you for having the guts to make something so wonderful. Perfume's album "GAME" is still J-pop audio bliss, and if you import one game this month, make it Rhythm Tengoku DS.

Game of the Month: Samurai Shodown II

Heather Campbell
SENIOR EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Games are a journey, and should be covered like travel journalism. It's more important to know how a game affects you than to provide a list of options it features on its menu screen. The number of guns, the types of vehicles, the variety of locations—these are bullet points for the back of the box. I'll tell you if it made me feel.

Brain Drain: Street Fighter IV Street Fighter IV Street Fighter IV Street Fighter IV Street Fighter IV Street Fighter IV Street Fighter IV.

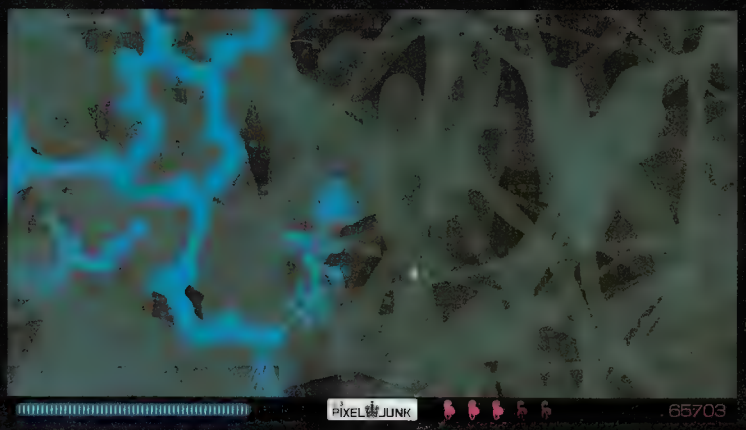
Game of the Month: Street Fighter IV

System: PS3 (Download) | **Developer:** Q Games | **Publisher:** SCEA | **ESRB:** E | **Available:** August

Pixel Junk Eden

A garden of delights

words Brady Fiechter



The delightful Grimp is a creature who appears to be part alien, part gum drop, part garden-dwelling insect. Its name is derived from "grip" and "jump," which could very succinctly describe the mechanics in Pixel Junk Eden, an "organic platformer" that has enough gripping and jumping to fill a dozen games. Take this as a compliment, because every time the Grimp leaps from the edge of a plant to precariously stick to the next twisted stalk or leaf, the sensation is a satisfying rush that doesn't let up.

The Grimp in Pixel Junk Eden can cast out a line of silk while it jumps, allowing you to navigate like a stationary yo-yo in an attempt to sweep up pollen sacks and release the seeds into surrounding pods, which sprout up new plants in an ever-growing sequence of garden building. Collecting the pollen becomes more of a treat when you find the skill to efficiently leap from one plant to the next, creating a graceful arc to sweep up everything in your path. Maintaining attachment to the silk line without landing on a solid surface creates a scintillating combo trail of light and color, as if you're spinning little blasts of stars in your wake. So simple and so rewarding.

> "The delightful Grimp is a creature who appears to be part alien, part gum drop, part garden-dwelling insect"

Ultimately you're searching the surreal landscape for a collection of spectra, which retune a crystal and buy you more time toward the next corner of the garden. If the crystal energy dissipates completely, it's game over. Little regeneration bubbles are deviously scattered throughout the garden, requiring a persistent hunt that drives the game's urgency: the constant battle to keep the crystals alive is the toughest part of PixelJunk Eden, forcing you to find a pattern and rhythm of play that can be as frustrating as it is rewarding. Like Pixel Junk Monsters, there comes a point where a true mastery of the game is more necessary than most games you're used to playing.

Up to three people can work together in PixelJunk Eden, which brings an additional element of challenge as you endeavor to all stay in a similar pattern of exploration to avoid falling out of screen. Alone or with friends, it's a battle to stay attached to the phantasmagoric foliage, because missing a leap not only sends you tumbling several screens below, but it wastes valuable time and saps the joy of keeping a skilled line of locomotion.

I wish I could say I found PixelJunk Eden as obsessively rousing as PixelJunk Monsters, but it is in no way less of an achievement and in some ways more substantial in its inventive designs. Q-Games owns the PSN space right now.

parting shot

System: PS2, Xbox 360, Wii, PC | Developer: Eden Studios | Publisher: Atari | Available: Now

Alone in the Dark

None more black...

Previously on Alone in the Dark: *You suffered like Job.*

Previously on Alone in the Dark: *You drove straight into the center of Frustrationville.*

Previously on Alone in the Dark: *You skipped over the inept parts to get to another, even more inept part.*

Previously on Alone in the Dark: *You discovered the joys of controlling the electronic equivalent of an ox wearing cement shoes.*

Previously on Alone in the Dark: *The camera hated you. And not just in the videogame. The camera hated you in life.*

Alone in the Dark is one of those rare ambitious titles that fails in almost every possible way. More to the point, it does so spectacularly, and with a genuine slap to its audience. It's not possible to forgive the game for its sins: Alone in the Dark is not fun, which is inexcusable. Nor is it workable, which, at any price, is hard to swallow.

Edward Carnby serves as the game's whipping boy. Under ordinary circumstances, it might be easy to take him as a sympathetic figure; he's an amnesiac trapped in a nightmarish blur of increasingly disturbing situations. Yet Carnby becomes as unlikable as the rest of this game, a boorish, droning oaf whose vocabulary begins with "shit" and ends with "f**k."

There is a great mystery to be had here, but it must be made plain: The mystery has nothing to do with Central Park or this twisted version of such. Instead, it involves Eden Studios and exactly what its staff was struggling to come to grips with when it should have been designing and implementing basic features of its game, notably, character movement. Carnby, either in the third- or first-person perspective, does not walk as much as he lumbers. His movements are stiff, palsied. He exhibits the grace of an 80-year-old hip-replacement candidate.

Simple tasks—manipulating inventory, exploration and combat—are made unduly difficult here. Item juggling becomes an unending chore; Carnby can only carry a small amount of items inside his pocketless jacket and items are arbitrarily assigned to one side of the jacket or the other. This means Carnby won't be able to, say, fit much-needed bullets on the right-hand side of his jacket or healing sprays on the left. Manipulating the inventory does not pause the game, either, so players attempting to build a Molotov cocktail (bottle, rag, lighter) will have to do so while being pummeled by foes. This, however, is preferable to using a melee weapon, because Eden thought it might be a good idea to simulate real-world movements on the game controller's analog stick. This was not a good idea. In fact, it was a terrible idea, because the game does not recognize up-and-down or left-and-right taps with any frequency. Carnby will jerk spasmodically or seize in the manner of an epileptic with great regularity, but will only swing through when the heavens are properly aligned.

There's more, too, but it only belabors the truth of how disappointing this return to Alone in the Dark really is after all these years. Driving sequences are toiling exercises plagued by collision problems and bugs requiring multiple resets. The camera aligns itself at inopportune moments, causing jarring perspective shifts. Even a clever improvisational weapons scheme, allowing Carnby to build his own weapons, is a trap. After a while, the protagonist is forced to perpetually search through garbage cans and abandoned cars for junk.

Forget the game's innovative use of serialized chapters. It only allows the frustrated to skip from one poorly done sequence to another. Do, however, think on this: Alone in the Dark is one of the frontrunners for this summer's biggest disappointment. .

parting shot

Here's the deal: Alone in the Dark has ideas, but ideas on paper are a lot less difficult than ideas given form in a game. They tried to make something different, stay away from the survival horror template, and quite frankly, failed on too many levels.

Monster Madness: Grave Danger

Dogs and cats living together...

words Dave Halverson

No, you're not experiencing déjà vu. I reviewed Monster Madness: Grave Danger back in May just prior to its subsequent delay (they had to make it extra good), so I'm back to make sure you don't forget to pick up the one and only top-down shooter for PS3 that also happens to be a genuine product of this generation, not some discount retro retread. If the game does well, I'll get that sequel, so do your part to assure this endangered species lives to shoot another day.

So I ask you: Do you like to shoot gremlins, harpies, imps, witches, succubi, martians, banshees, bigfoots, vampires, werewolves, legless clown torsos that paddle around in wagons, gym teachers that sprout giant spider legs, evil robots, evil clowns, evil grannies, explosive zombies, dragon zombies, fat zombies and dog zombies? You can even take a crack at Bob Zombie! And those are but a sampling of the infestation. How about piloting a swan boat, dune buggy, UFO, quad, tank or a mech fabricated out of an old VW bug?

You want guns? We got guns! Larry Tools is more than happy to exchange your Monster Tokens and any parts you've collected for a CD launcher, Shot Gun, Glue Cannon, Nail Guns, Mini Gun, Defibrillator, Flame Thrower... he'll even power them up or sell your character specialized items to boost their respective attributes. There are plenty of melee weapons to equip or pick up too (the chain saw always seems to grab their attention), along with one made especially for each character.

Whether you like to shoot alone or with a friend (or three) there's plenty of carnage to go around, along with four characters ready to do your bidding: Zack the geek, Carrie the goth chick, Andy the surf rat, or Jennifer the blonde bimbo. Be sure to scroll through the laundry list of ultra-cool challenge levels by the way, especially the ones featuring your character of choice. You'll be wanting to unlock Jennifer's bikini, French maid, cheerleader and other assorted costumes. Zack and Carrie's Neo and Trinity getups are cool, too—and don't they make such a cute couple?

Here's the thing about Monster Madness: Grave Danger. It's instant fun, alone or multiplayer, and you can level-up your weapons and characters and unlock outfits and beast bios until the cows come home, grow to a ripe old age and go off to fulfill their destiny of clogging your arteries. It's a supercool, super-original shooter, covered in wall-to-wall hi-res textures and bursting with eye-popping special effects.

"It's a supercool, super-original shooter, covered in wall-to-wall hi-res textures and bursting with eye-popping special effects"

Jennifer does my bidding.

parting shot

Grave Danger is the perfect between-meal snack for the PS3. This is the game you play between epics like Metal Gear or when you just feel like ogling cool graphics and blasting away to your heart's content. As top-down shooters go, it's wonderfully designed and nuanced, especially on PS3, where it's undergone a thorough redesign.

System: Xbox 360 | **Developer:** Electronic Arts | **Publisher:** Electronic Arts | **Multi:** 1-4 | **ESRB:** Teen | **Available:** August

Command & Conquer 3: Kane's Wrath

Kane's not so able

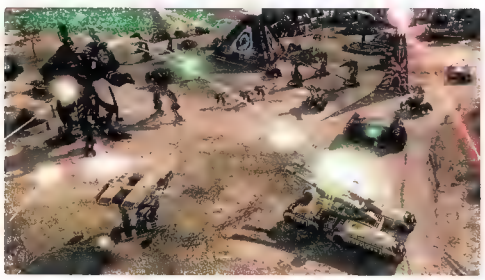
Why is Kane so mad? It's not the ridiculous face mask he has to wear for part of Command & Conquer 3: Kane's Wrath. Rather, it's because he's a victim of console RTS (real-time strategy) syndrome.

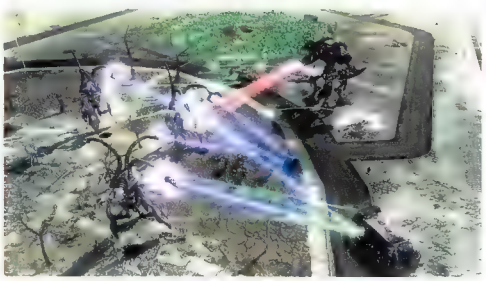
Electronic Arts labored mightily to port Kane's Wrath to Xbox 360. Real-time strategies require a lot of precision, accuracy and flexibility in terms of their controls. Without them, it is impossible to achieve speed and, thus, timely strategy. Miss any one of these factors, and an RTS player is handicapped.

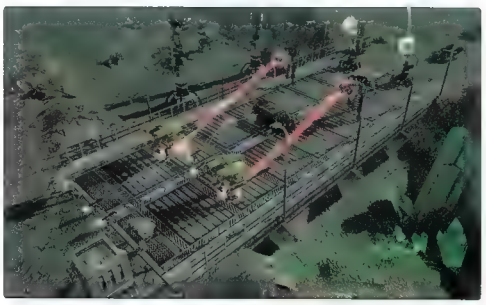
With Wrath on the Xbox 360, the game sacrifices a bit of precision, some accuracy and a portion of flexibility. Forming specific army units from a mass of (very tiny) forces

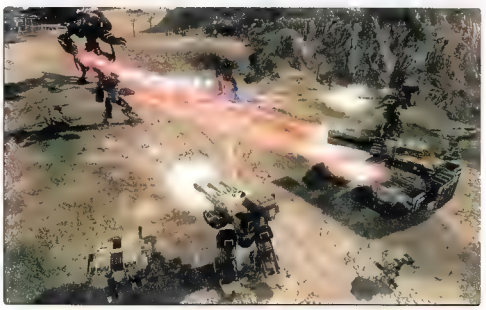
> "The game sacrifices a bit of precision, accuracy and flexibility..."

proves difficult when the units are stationary, and near impossible if they're in motion. The game allows would-be world beaters to sort through a series of radial-based menus to access individual buildings and create new forces, but navigating through them with the Xbox 360's analog stick is fiddly enough that seconds, precious seconds, are sacrificed in the effort. In the end, the mass rush becomes the preferred tactic, and it's overwhelming force, not strategy, that wins the day. Kane's Wrath becomes, at once, an exercise in "For Want of a Nail." **Greg Orlando**



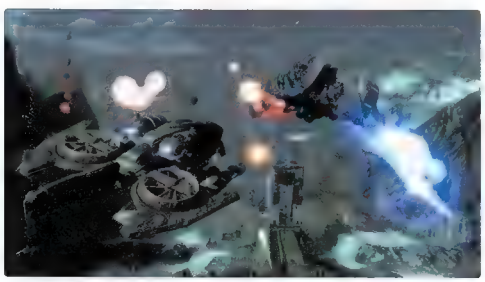


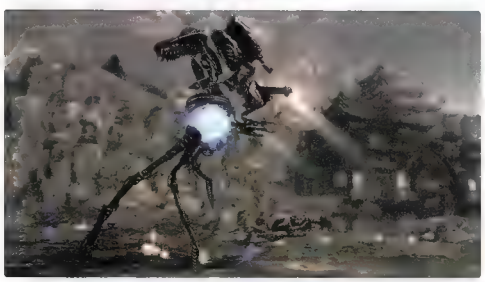


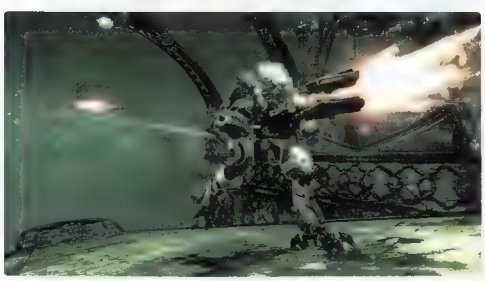


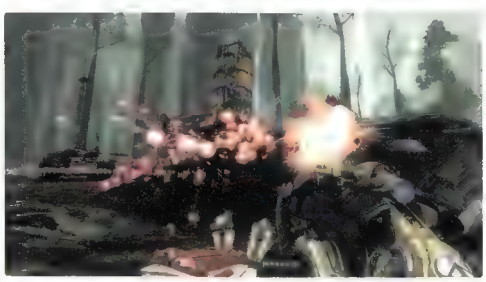
parting shot

"The victorious strategist only seeks battle after the victory has been won..." — Sun Tzu









System: Xbox 360 | **Developer:** Epic Games | **Publisher:** Midway | **Multi:** Multi-mode, split screen | **Available:** July

Unreal Tournament III

More TLC, less DLC

Having played the PC and PS3 versions of Unreal Tournament 3 extensively, I can confirm that, several months after the release of those versions, they continue to reinvigorate the user base through map and character mods. Due to the parameters of the Xbox 360's hardware model, this edition of UT3 is currently unable to replicate the mod-tastic perks of other versions. However, the UT3 game you'll receive on the 360 DVD contains all the official post-release maps available so far, two new character types and a handy split-screen two-player mode. And as with previous versions, Unreal Tournament 3 on Xbox 360 is very easy on the eyes.

Unlike the recently ported letdown Quake Wars, UT3 remains a technical powerhouse on 360. It's using the latest revision of the Unreal Engine 3, offering players a glimpse of the sort of lavish visuals they'll receive in Gears of War 2 later this year. Besides all the absurdly detailed texturing and high-level shaders, I especially enjoy the engine's ability to render detailed distant 3-D images, like a giant cityscape across a river.

The Xbox 360 version plays great. UT3 is a hyper-fast twitch example of the form, not a tactical beast. Vehicles and hoverboards feel excellent via the 360 controller, though you'll probably want to change control type to "Direct" in the options. Sure, the campaign mode rolls out like an extended training session, a story of Necris invasion and sinister mega-corporations—loaded with contrivances to guide you through the game's various play modes. However, the pace is brisk and there are enough cinematics and voiced bits along the way to ground the action in a place and time.

It's great that you can take advantage of this version's new split-screen mode to co-op through the campaign or battle locally, but I can't say that it's a huge selling point. Personally, I wouldn't be caught dead sharing half a screen with somebody in a FPS in this day and age, especially one this sexy. **Mike Griffin**

parting shot

A fine port of a proven multiplayer-focused FPS with some of the fastest action in the genre. Lack of mods doesn't mean an absence of quality downloadable content.

System: Xbox 360, PS3 | **Developer:** High Moon Studios | **Publisher:** Vivendi | **Rated:** T | **Multi:** NA | **Available:** June

Robert Ludlum's The Bourne Conspiracy

Fast and furious

"The takedowns are the game's centerpiece, and they come off well."

Forget the need for introspective gaming and plug into The Bourne Conspiracy, a short-order action experience that is as much flash as it is play. You play as Jason Bourne, that hapless bloke from the *Bourne* movies and books who is always running somewhere or from something. When it's time for hand-to-hand combat, the Button-Pushing Sequence comes into play, ending up with some part of some bad guy's body getting smashed into the highly destructible environments. The takedowns are the game's centerpiece, and they come off well. It's the weapons combat that's half-baked, making you wish they would have offered even more of the parts of the game that you don't really strategize with as much as watch happen.

Moves are extremely easy to pull off and flirt with monotony, yet are presented with a slick visual kick that mimics the hyperactive camera work of the films; the game looks exceptionally good. There's a progressive ambition here mixed with some clumsy, tired convention—the kind of concoction that will find a healthy, satisfied audience before being lost in the pile. **Brady Fiechter**

parting shot

Credit High Moon Studios for trying something different and succeeding in large enough doses to give the game a look (rental). The gameplay is inconsistent, but satisfies with the kinetic melee focus.

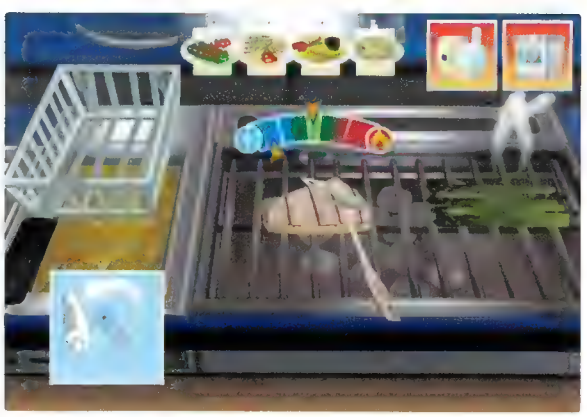
System: Wii | **Developer:** Wuper Villain Studios | **Publisher:** Zoo Games | **Multi:** 1-2 | **ESRB:** E | **Available:** july

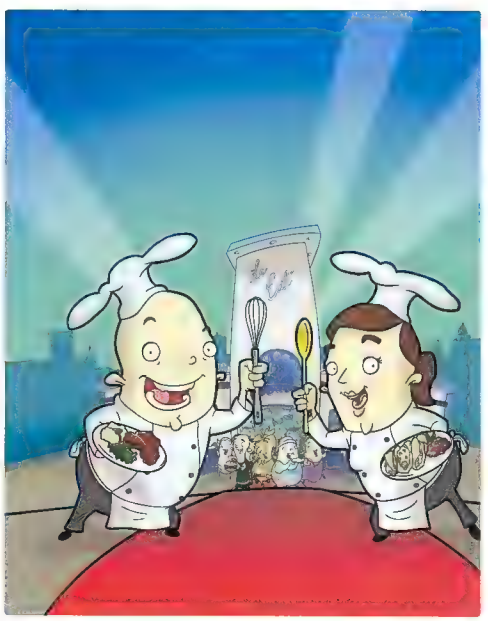
Order Up!

Get into the kitchen and cook!

Order Up is an odd bag, a mostly casual gaming experience that makes me want to throw the word "casual" out the window. There is just enough urgency and earnings management to fit into some sort of pleasing game structure: You prepare meals for demanding customers, endeavor to make money and expand your restaurant skills. Outside of some fun minigames, like shaking awake an assistant who's sleeping on the job and flicking rats off the kitchen counter, the brunt of Order Up!'s light challenges lie in getting meals into the hands of anxiously waiting customers, who demand proper temperature, spices, consistency, etc—all which demand a balancing act in your kitchen: stir the pasta while the meat is cooking, but don't forget the fries about to burn in the hot oil. The stakes and the challenge grow by the stature of the restaurant you just bought into.

One of Order Up!'s little surprises is its loopy, high-spirit presetantation, and the basic functionality of the Wiimote works exceptionally well in bringing a tactile, rhythmic fun to the cooking tasks. The game overuses some of its core ideas, but that won't stop the fun of this delightful game that really does belong snuggly on the Wii. **Brady Fiechter**





parting shot

A game where you run restaurants and cook great meals to please customers. Well presented and pleasingly addictive. It may wear out its welcome if you're expecting depth and variety, but that's not the point.

System: PS2, Wii (reviewed) | **Developer:** Papaya Studios | **Publisher:** Crave Entertainment | **Multi:** NA | **ESRB:** E | **Available:** Now

George of the Jungle: Search and Rescue

Jungle boogie

Crave Entertainment snuck George of the Jungle (based on the new Cartoon Network series) onto store shelves, forgoing any press coverage; indubitably to avoid the slathering it would have encountered. But cringe not, oh masters of the obscure videogame release! You need not fear my tenet! At $24.99 (or less, depending on where you exchange currency for games), you could do worse.

While it's nothing to write home about, George of the Jungle is a passable side-scroller patterned after those 16-bit platformers of old, only in a sparse yet charming polygonal package. In fact, the game's three-lives-and-you're-out gameplay model (although you can amass one-ups) is what really saves it. Besides double-jumping, climbing and swinging on vines, George dishes out a surprisingly robust array of maneuvers to deal with the game's various jungle beasts and workman-like but clever obstacles, including head-bashing through destructible floors, tuck-n-rolling over and under deadly traps, and dashing into obstructions using his thick skull to dizzy opponents or clear his way.

"The three-lives-and-you're-out model is what really saves it."

What could have been a real yawn-fest with unlimited continues is actually an enjoyable throwback, with a real sense of accomplishment coming with each foiled boss. Papaya Studios does a nice job integrating the Wiimote and Nunchuk, too, and manage to sneak in a cheeky bit of 3-D by way of George's pet elephant, Shep. It's run-of-the-mill, mind you, and has its share of insidious quirks, but the mill has been out of commission so long that it's a welcome stroll through the jungle at roughly the price of a venti mocha latte and a gallon of gas. Like all "kids" games, kids will hate it (it's too hard for 'em, and they all want T-rated shooters anyway), but the Genesis/SNES faithful will likely consider it *dinero* well spent, or at least a worthy rental to remind us how spoiled we've become. **Dave Halverson**

parting shot

The simplistic look does right by the cartoon (and that's it—don't expect any shiny effects) and with a little patience, there's a good bit of gameplay on hand to wash it all down...for a bargain-bin side-scroller. George wears the quirky warts of all those average 16-bit side-scrollers surprisingly well.

"An assortment of original twists make it a bona-fide original..."

System: Wii | **Developer:** Eidos Studios Sweden | **Publisher:** Eidos | **Multi:** 1-4 | **Available:** Now

Wacky Races: Crash & Dash

Wacky Wii wacer

Taking a page from the dusty old top-down (overhead) racing game handbook, the 24 rallies spread over Wacky Races' Crazy Circuit are evocative of point-and-go arcade classics like Super Sprint and Super Off-Road—only polygonal, many times larger and topped off with an assortment of innovative twists that make it a bona-fide original.

The racing hinges on several elements, among which filling the Mad Dash Meter (which spills into Mad Dash Cogs) proves most essential, since every race culminates in a final stretch where the more Mad Dash Cogs you have, the faster you go, by way of shaking the Wiimote like it just ate your quarters. There are also two kinds of widgets scattered among each rally for launching attacks: Wacky Widgets, for unleashing one of each racer's three Wacky Powers, and Way-Out Wacky Widgets for launching signature attacks. Causing breakdowns—along with holding the lead or using a Way-Out Wacky Power to perform a screen-clearing Super Screen Out—fills the Mad Dash Meter faster. You can boost at will, too, although doing so drains the Mad Dash Meter, so be quick about it, and watch out for Traps while you're at it. Traps (courtesy of Dick Dastardly) trigger one of a half-dozen or so mid-race minigames, complete with cartoon clip setups. Win the minigame and go directly to the front of the pack. So, in any given race you may not only be dealing with driving, but collecting, assailing and playing minigames—pretty wacky. The cool thing is that it's all user-controlled. The difficulty, number of opponents (there are 11 Wacky Racers), Wacky Powers, Surprises and Traps can all be toggled on or off, and up to four players can compete on a single screen. To top it all off, the crazy babbling commentator is back, along with original compositions by Richard Jacques and the original Hanna-Barbera music. **Dave Halverson**

parting shot

Eight years after painting a smile on many a Dreamcast user's face, the Wacky Racers are back, once again making the most of another platform. This one's a casual racer, best played with friends and family, but there's something here for core gamers, too, in that it's a take on an arcade archetype. Nice presentation, too, especially the car models.

Fallout 3
Presents
A Post-Apocalyptic Film Festival
Sponsored by Bethesda Softworks, the American Cinematheque and Geek Monthly magazine
Tickets go on sale July 25 at
www.geekmonthly.com and at www.fandango.com
Every ticket comes with 1 free popcorn and soda!
The Schedule
Friday, August 22, 2008 – Starts 7:30 PM
Film 1 – Wizards (1977) Directed by Ralph Bakshi
Film 2 - Damnation Alley (1977) Directed by Jack Smight
Film 3 - A Boy and His Dog (1975) Directed by L.Q. Jones
Saturday, August 23, 2008 – Starts 7:30 PM
Film 1 - The Last Man on Earth (1964) Directed by Ubaldo Ragona
Film 2 - The Omega Man (1971) Directed by Boris Sagal
Film 3 - Twelve Monkeys (1995) Directed by Terry Gilliam
The location
Aero Theatre
1328 Montana Avenue (corner of 14th Street)
Santa Monica, California
Fallout 3
Bethesda SOFTWORKS
a ZeniMax Media company
geek MONTHLY
Additional information about the event can be obtained at www.americancinematheque.com

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preview **System:** PSP **Developer:** Marvelous Ent. Inc. / K2 **Publisher:** Marvelous Ent. USA / XSEED **Multi:** 1-2 Player Local **ESRB Rating:** RP **Available:** Fall 2008

Valhalla Knights 2

Return to the halls of heaven

words Eric L. Patterson

The original Valhalla Knights was a wonderful yet grossly underappreciated game, one I took to instantly, as it brought with it a whole list of features and gameplay elements that I had been wanting from the Japanese RPG genre for years. With the game's sequel set for release in the U.S. this fall, I posed five questions about Valhalla Knights 2 to Katsuaki Suwahara, project planner at AddPlus (the development company working with K2 and Marvelous Entertainment) and Doh Whang, localization lead for VK2 at XSEED.

Q&A

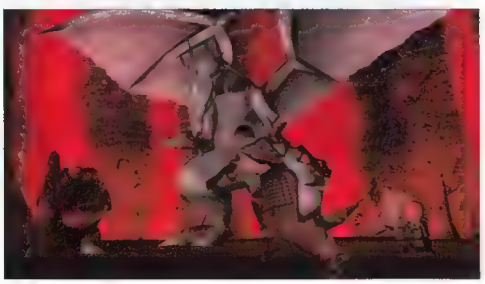
Katsuaki Suwahara Project Planner, AddPlus
Doh Whang Localization Lead, XSEED

Play: What do the new races and job classes bring to Valhalla Knights 2?
Katsuaki Suwahara: There's a new race of warriors fit for battle called Akatoki, as well as a new Canine race, which will act as the party's mascot. In terms of new jobs, the Monk class is a frontline job specializing in hand-to-hand combat, while the Enchanter job class is the only one that can deal status effects such as poison or paralysis. There is also a Guard class, which is a job that only dogs can have, as their specialty is confusing the enemy with the dog's distinct movements.
Doh Whang: The new races and job classes obviously bring more variety, but more importantly, they add more flavor and depth to the gameplay.

What kinds of changes have been introduced to the character creator?
KS: You are now able to choose from six different kinds of hairstyles and face types. The Machine race can select from six different kinds of body types and engines, while dogs can be any of six different breeds available.
DW: Just wanted to point out, that's six different kinds of hairstyles and face types *per* race and *per* gender. That's like a billion total…someone help me with the math…

Have there been any major changes to the AI for party members?
KS: In Valhalla Knights 2, we have added "Skill," "Dizzy," "Burst" and many other features into the game. We have also re-created the AI from the ground up so it can incorporate those new features.
DW: I personally felt that the AI in the first Valhalla was solid, since you could control them indirectly with thought points. VK2 builds on that system with new features Suwahara-san already mentioned, and as a result, the AI executes them flawlessly and effectively. The things these AI party members do during battle are pretty fantastic at times.

One of the biggest complaints about Valhalla Knights was that quest objectives weren't always clear. How has this been changed in VK2?
KS: The player can now review the quest details from the camp menu. Also, as the quest progresses on, additional information and hints for the next required action regarding the completion of the quest will be continuously added.
DW: The quest journal in the camp menu definitely helps, as it directs you on what to do next without giving too much away when you feel lost. It's a nice little feature that ensures the players won't be stuck in one place for no good reason. Also, in Valhalla Knights 2, if you feel like you want to quit a quest for whatever reason, whether it is because it is too hard or because you feel unprepared to complete it, you can! You can quit the old and accept a new quest at the guild, and retry the old later if you choose.



"The new races and job classes obviously bring more variety, but more importantly, they add more flavor and depth to the gameplay."

The other main complaint was how much effort equipment switching took when changing classes. Has this been addressed at all?
KS: VK2 has an inventory capacity of 60 items. If your inventory is full, you can rent a storage facility at the guild for the items that have been removed when you change jobs. This way, the pain of reorganizing items should be mostly alleviated.
DW: I would like to chime in and add something. As Suwahara-san said, the first Valhalla Knights had a rather small inventory capacity, forcing the players to reorganize and throw away items in their inventory just to make enough space to accommodate the equipment being dumped into it for each job change. With the expanded inventory capacity, changing jobs is definitely less of a hassle. Also, just to let you in on a secret, when the storage facility is maxed out, it can hold up to 600 items—for a fee of course. [laughs] Nevertheless, it is a very convenient feature to have, especially for those of you that hate deciding what to throw away and what to keep. Awesomeness!

preview

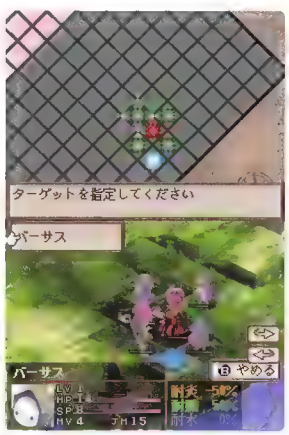
System: DS **Developer:** Nippon Ichi **Publisher:** NIS America **Available:** July

Disgaea DS

Before the sun sets on the Afternoon of Darkness, Laharl and company will enjoy one final foray on the Nintendo DS—the game's third iteration, in which Nippon Ichi once again manages to bring something new to the table. Ported from the PSP, additional content comes by way of an overhead display grid utilizing the dual screens, new playable characters—most notably Nippon Ichi's unofficial mascot Pleinair—stylus play and a Prinny commentary. For the uninitiated, Prinnies are strange little creatures resembling a cross between a bat and a penguin, that serve as vessels for the souls of the deceased carrying out their penance as slaves. You think that's weird? Wait until you meet the rest of the cast.

If you've never played a Disgaea game before, it's an easily accessible yet incredibly deep strategy RPG series that's given rise to a cottage industry including anime, manga and merchandise based on the misadventures of the demon Laharl, who is awakened from a two-year slumber by his father's vassal Etna, to news that dear ole dad—King of the Overworld—has met an untimely demise. A battle for the throne ensues.

I highly recommend watching the anime if you're new to the series. I was really hoping that this version would be the one to fix Laharl's hyperactive overworld animation, but it wasn't to be. Otherwise, DS owners will find this a surprisingly well-ported version. Better hurry, though: Disgaea 3 is just around the corner! **Dave Halverson**

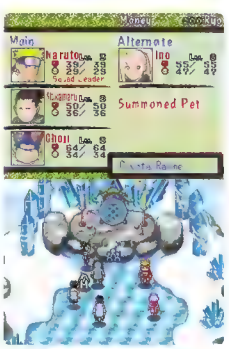


preview

System: DS | **Developer:** Tomy | **Publisher:** D3 | **Available:** September

Naruto: PotN 2

Naruto: Path of the Ninja 2 is a vast step above the last game's weak GBA origins, despite its adherence to that game's basic role-playing foundation. Built from the ground up for DS, this sequel starts with the obvious improvements by adding in over 30 characters, with an emphasis on more depth of story and complexity of play to go beyond the stock appeal of the Naruto universe. The first game did little to make use of the dual-screen format, but TOMY insists they're integrating a suite of ideas to justify the DS platform. For the first time, Wi-fi play will also bring in the multiplayer component. **Heather Campbell**

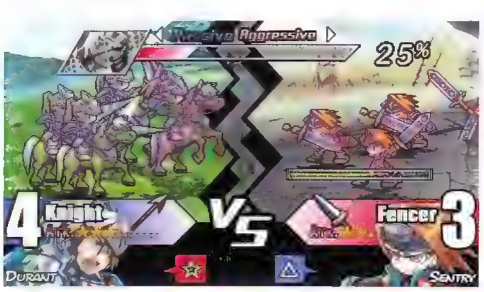


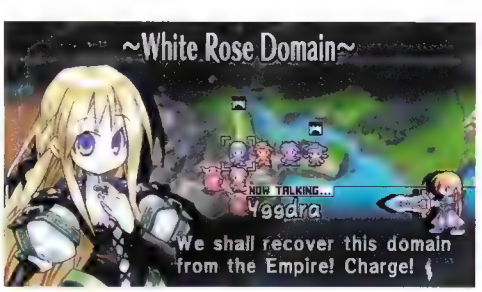
preview

System: Psp **Dev:** Sting **Pub:** Atlus **Avail:** September

Yggdra Union: ~We'll Never Fight Alone~

There's a good chance you missed out on Yggdra Union the first time around, as its stateside release came near the end of the reign of the GBA. If that is indeed the case, or if you just crave your SRPG gaming on Sony's handheld, Atlus will be bringing us the PSP remake of Yggdra this September. In addition to true widescreen support–including sprites that are properly sized for the PSP's screen, instead of just being GBA sprites enlarged and blurred–the PSP version will include both Japanese and English voices, new playable characters, additional missions, difficulty options, and more. **Eric L. Patterson**

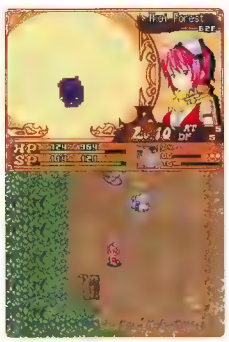




www.playmagazine.com

System: DS **Developer:** SUCCESS / Ninja Studio **Publisher:** Atlus **Multi:** 1 Player **ESRB Rating:** Teen **Available:** July 22

Izuna 2: The Unemployed Ninja Returns



"For her second outing, it turns out our pink-haired ninja heroine had more surprises in store than I was expecting."

The original Izuna was a "roguelike" dungeon crawler that, while flawed and visually uninspiring, found its way into my heart and compelled me to keep going back to it long after the game's release. For her second outing, Izuna 2: The Unemployed Ninja Returns, turns out our pink-haired ninja heroine had more surprises in store for me than I was expecting. I'm honestly amazed at the jump in quality Izuna 2 presents over the original; this time around, Izuna has a whole world to explore instead of a single "hub" town connecting all the dungeons, the graphical elements are much improved (even if water still has zero frames of animation), and small gameplay updates or additions can be found all over.

An even bigger change is in the tweaks that were put in place to no doubt make Izuna 2 friendlier to the non-hardcore crowd. Chief among these is the tag team system, where Izuna can partner up with one of many potential allies, each of whom bring to the mix weapon types not seen in the game before. Tag team attacks and being able to swap between characters aside, the single biggest effect this new element has on the game is that the player has essentially been given an "extra life," as when one character dies, the other can continue on. It's a crutch that will definitely help some players get farther in the game, but I'm not completely happy about having that safety net present.

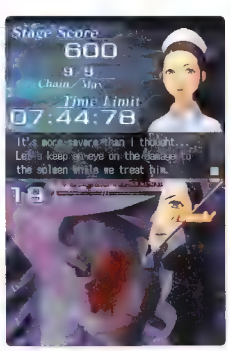
While Izuna 2 may still not be the belle of the DS dungeon crawler ball (that title goes to Shiren), it has become a deeper, more polished, and more accessible game that can now be enjoyed be a far wider audience. Yet, in one final moment of surprise, as awkward and unrefined as the first Izuna was, I almost think I liked her better. **Eric L. Patterson**

parting shot

A wider audience will be able to enjoy Izuna this time around, thanks to the many refinements the game has been given; those who got a kick out of the first game, however, may not be completely happy with the changes in style and difficulty.

System: DS **Developer:** Atlus **Publisher:** Atlus **Multi:** 1 Player **ESRB Rating:** Teen **Available:** July 1

Trauma Center: Under The Knife 2



The secret to surgery: drawing pentagrams on people's organs..

Part of me hates playing Trauma Center. Not because the games aren't enjoyable, mind you, but because even though my brain reminds me that I'm simply performing a virtual operation via a plastic stylus on a 3-inch screen, the nervousness I feel as my hand moves to slice a man open and play god with his intestines is utterly ridiculous.

And yet, the excitement of the OR without the fear of nasty side effects like death or malpractice suits is what helped make Atlus' surgical series the cult classic it has become. After a brief residency stint over on the Wii, Dr. Stiles and his faithful nurse sidekick Angie return to the DS in Trauma Center: Under the Knife 2. A lot has changed since young Derek first practiced his craft, including a most welcome inclusion of per-event difficulty selection, refinement to your trusty medical equipment along with the game's overall control, and the introduction of the far more appealing art style from the Wii chapters.

What hasn't changed, for good or bad, is the basic premise: a few random operations here and there until something nefarious happens, and next thing you know, the world is under the threat of another pandemic unleashed by a sinister shadow organization. Under the Knife 2 is another solid chapter of the Trauma Center saga, and if you're torn on which portable version to pick up, without hesitation this is the better of the DS offerings. If you've played the first three games, however, don't expect to find a lot new here; and, if you're like me, you can't help but wonder what Atlus could do with this series if they based it more around the human drama of doctors and their patients (and less on B-movie sci-fi-ness.) **Eric L. Patterson**

parting shot

With improved gameplay, better difficulty control and more appealing visuals, Trauma Center: Under the Knife 2 is a superior game to the original DS cult classic. Next time, though, no more wacky sci-fi-esque operations, please.

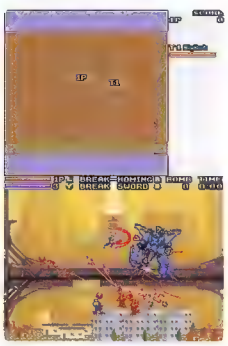
System: DS **Dev:** Treasure **Pub:** D3 Publishing **ESRB:** E **Avail:** August

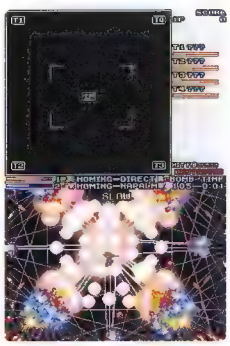
Bangai-O Spirits

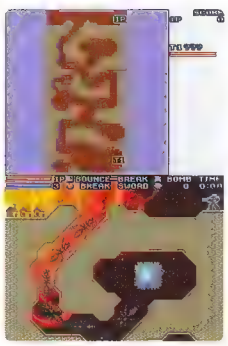
First off, let me just say how wonderful I think it is that 2D games are not only surviving, but thriving in this modern era. Manipulating sprites was fun in the past, and so it remains, especially in the hands of masters like Treasure.

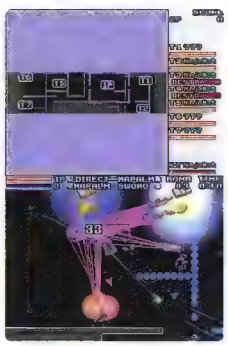
Considering the ubiquity of Nintendo's little DS, I might have expected Bangai-O Spirits to retain the overall simplicity of its predecessors on Nintendo 64 and Dreamcast. Instead, Treasure have, in typical fashion, gone nuts with the concept. Though you are still piloting a tiny-on-screen mech through free-moving stages and shooting everything in sight, there are now far more than the original two weapons to choose from. Making things very interesting, the weapons can be mixed and matched for each stage, bringing a level of depth and discovery to the gameplay that Treasure always delivers. The stage design is equally inventive and innovative, often providing as much challenge as the enemies themselves.

As far as sprite action is concerned, I don't think the DS has ever seen this much. Just like classic shooters of yore, things will briefly come to a crawl as the screen is filled with missiles and explosions. This isn't bad. It's dramatic and awesome, because you've done something right if you've gotten the screen filled with fire! **Mike Hobbs**









parting shot

Addictive, intense, impeccably conceived, and occasionally very weird. Yup, this is a Treasure game. Lots of levels and even an editor make this the ultimate Bangai-O.

System: DS **Developer:** Vicarious Visions **Publisher:** Activision **Multi:** 1-2 Player **ESRB Rating:** E **Available:** June

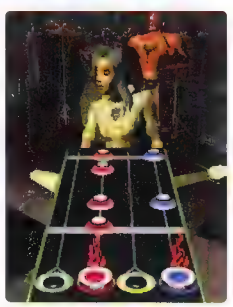
Guitar Hero On Tour

It's possible to feel less like a rock god than while playing Guitar Hero On Tour, but only if the person in question happens to be a tax accountant giving a seminar at the local Ramada Inn, the one right by the airport or, perhaps, a member of Limp Bizkit.

The console Guitar Hero games work because they present a wonderful lineup of songs and challenging rhythm sequences that, with the aid of a faux ax, make players feel like Angus Young or Eddie Van Halen, even if it's in the most peripheral way imaginable.

Guitar Hero On Tour attempts to simulate its console brethren with a four-button add-on that attaches to the Nintendo DS—either the original version or its slimmer counterpart—and a stylus that resembles a pick. Immediately shattered is the wonderful illusion that the player is about to rock and should, thus, be saluted.

Now, Guitar Hero On Tour must stand on the strength of rhythm-based challenges, its soundtrack and the finger-cramping attachment required to play it. And with that, the tour proves a long road, one fraught with few anthems and an onscreen warning to avoid cramps by taking frequent breaks. Somewhere, Mr. Hendrix is weeping. **Greg Orlando**



parting shot

"Rock is dead, they say. Long live rock."—The Who

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RIZ-ZOAWD

I'm in ur Oz, RIZ-ZOAWDing ur fairytalez

System: Nintendo DS **Developer:** Media.Vision **Publisher:** D3 Publishing **Available:** 2008

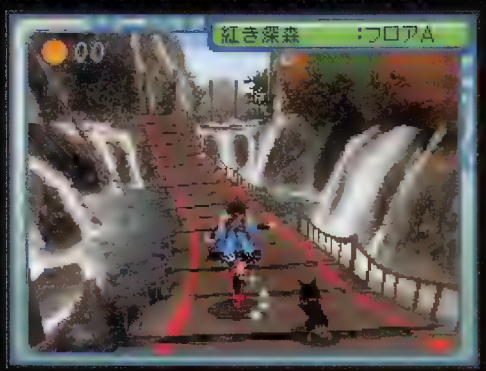
words Casey Loe

In Japan's franchise-driven marketplace, what's a small developer with no intellectual property to do? The answer's so simple, I'm stunned that everyone isn't doing it—dip into the public domain and swipe a piece of classic literature for free! I'd probably have gone with *Alice in Wonderland* or *Gulliver's Travels*, but *The Wizard of Oz*? That'll do just fine. And so Media.Vision, the makers of the Wild Arms series, have secured a sweet little license for their DS debut, and can pour all that extra licensing money into making the prettiest damn 3-D engine we've ever seen on the platform.

RIZ-ZOAWD (an anagram of "wizard" and "Oz") is set in Oz and stars Dorothy, Toto, a lion, a scarecrow and a tin man, but it doesn't have a whole lot else in common with L. Frank Baum's original novel. After being deposited in Oz by the tornado, Dorothy and Toto find the Wizard of Oz almost immediately, and he charges her with collecting a series of magic eggs that have been scattered throughout the four main regions of Oz: Winter, Spring, Summer and Autumn. It doesn't sound like Dorothy squashes any witches on her trip to Oz—crushing people to death under houses is *so* Red Ocean—but the witches are in the mix somewhere, and Dorothy will be caught in the middle of an ongoing battle between them and the Wizard.

The seasonal regions of Oz have been rendered in full 3-D environments that boast a level of detail that we've never seen from the DS before. We haven't had a chance to see the game in motion yet, so it remains to be seen if Media.Vision has somehow pulled off an incredible technical feat, or if RIZ-ZOAWD simply runs at five frames per second. At least we can be reasonably confident that the game will sound beautiful, even if the talented Michiko Kakeru (of Wild Arms fame) has to share composer duties with Hitoshi "I compose every third game released in Japan and they all sound exactly the same" Sakimoto.

Players will control Dorothy entirely with the stylus, using a trackball-esque sphere on the lower screen to guide her movements and tapping arrow keys to move the camera. Apparently the trackball allows Dorothy to run at blistering speeds, all the better to avoid the onscreen monsters that plague the land of Oz. If you do encounter one, the game switches to a traditional Dragon Quest-style battle system, although with a few twists, such as the possibility that other on-field enemies might wander over and join the battle in progress. The most interesting—and perhaps most controversial—aspect of RIZ-ZOAWD is that the game will be happy to do all the fighting for you.



"The most interesting—and perhaps most controversial—aspect of RIZ-ZOAWD is its battle system."

Whenever a turn begins, the game presents a screen showing the actions the AI has chosen for each character: Dorothy casts Protect on the Scarecrow, the Scarecrow casts Slow on a Blue Ghost, the Lion uses a Heal Berry on the Tin Man, and so on. Players can then tap any word of the AI's orders to change the action, item, spell or target, or just hit OK and let the game do as it pleases.

If you haven't guessed it by now, RIZ-ZOAWD isn't exactly aiming for the hardcore crowd. Each area is entirely self-contained, making this a rare "stage-clear RPG," in the own words of the developers. Everything is stylus-controlled, because your mom doesn't understand how buttons work, and players need never make so much as a single combat decision if they don't want to. All of that scares me, frankly, but RIZ-ZOAWD is much too beautiful to ignore, and Media.Vision has too good of a track record to discount them completely. Could this be that rare game that is both accessible to newcomers and enjoyable for core gamers? That's the same strategy that made Opoona such a monster hit, so...uh...No, wait, Opoona bombed dramatically with core gamers and newbies alike. Yikes. Hopefully Media.Vision will do a better job of it, or their strangely memorable title will be forever linked with games that have beautiful graphics and shallow play mechanics. ("You bought Dead or Alive Xtreme 2? You just got RIZ-ZOAWD!")

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System: PlayStation 2 | **Developer:** Sega | **Publisher:** Sega | **Available:** Now Japan, Unannounced U.S

Phantasy Star Complete Collection (Sega Ages Vol. 32)

Phantasy Star yesterday, today, forever

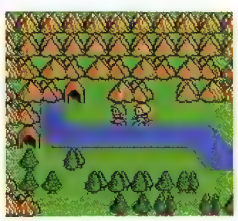
words Nick Des Barres & Casey Loe

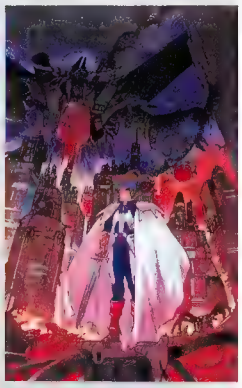
Believe it or not, Phantasy Star was once considered the most technically advanced, forward-thinking RPG series of all time. On the occasion of the release of Phantasy Star Complete Collection, a superb, feature-packed compilation disc including every single pre-PSO Phantasy Star (including obscure spin-offs), Nick Des Barres and Casey Loe attempt to explain just how groundbreaking a series it was.

words Casey Loe

Nick Des Barres: What does Phantasy Star mean to you, Casey Loe?

Casey Loe: If you didn't live through that era, you can't possibly understand—looking back on Phantasy Star from the 21st century, it seems like just another RPG, albeit an unusually pretty one for its time, and a very rare attempt at mixing sci-fi with fantasy. But owning a Sega Master System and being able to play Phantasy Star in 1988 was like owning a copy of Halo while the rest of the world was still playing Wolfenstein 3D. Yes, Phantasy Star was surely developed in response to the sales of Dragon Quest in Japan. But Sega had the foresight to bring Phantasy Star straight to the U.S., while Nintendo and Enix waited several years to establish the RPG genre in North America. As a result, Phantasy Star was like a game that had been sent back from the future. It was the largest console game ever made at that point, and its 3-D dungeons were arguably the visual high point of the entire generation. It was one of the first games to ever have subplots, and a full party of fleshed-out characters, and planets, and vehicles, and graphical cut scenes, and a million other goddamn things that it gets basically no credit for because the NES-owning fascists won the system war and got to write the history books. When Dragon Quest—the first NES RPG—came out a full year later and everyone creamed their pants over that primitive piece of garbage, I wanted to strangle them all. Screw you, pathetic sheep of the late '80s, lining up to buy your shitty 52-color Nintendo Entertainment Systems! Yes, you had Zelda and Metroid and Mega Man and Castlevania, but Phantasy Star KICKED YOUR ASS SO HARD IT'S STILL BLEEDING. Sega will be back for revenge one day! JUST YOU WAIT AND SEE! Damn it, now I'm all angry. What was the question again?





> "Phantasy Star kicked your ass so hard it's still bleeding." —CASEY LOE

NDB: Oh, you answered it better than any other man alive could have. Rieko Kodama and Yuji Naka's original Phantasy Star was almost certainly the most advanced console game of the entire 8-bit generation, but the true mystical qi energy of the series derives from the fact that it didn't simply end there. Phantasy Star continued to kick your ass unmercifully. Think about PSII—its huge cast of characters, almost unbelievably complex dungeons and overwhelmingly dour tone. It was the first RPG I ever played in which a central character died...and stayed dead. You can't cast "Raise" on loved ones in real life, and neither could you here—I was 11 years old, my Genesis pad sprinkled with innocent, glistening boy-tears. As if that wasn't brutal enough, at the end of the game you fail to save the galaxy and every single member of your party is slaughtered. What Phantasy Star I did for technology, II did for scenario. It was completely unprecedented.

CL: Hey, you don't know that they died! They totally could have won that fight! Or Lutz could have saved them! Or...or...Shut up! Just shut up! Nei came back to life and saved Rolf and... [sniff] They're...they're happy now, and...oh God. I'm going...I'm going to need a minute here. Okay. Yes, PSII fulfilled the nigh impossible task of being a worthy sequel to the greatest game of all time. And then Phantasy Star III, a game made by an almost entirely different team and shoehorned into the series...existed.

Moving on, Phantasy Star: End of the Millennium was an exceptional ending to the series, a great game that managed to tie up most of the series' loose ends, although you'd never know that from the awful English localization. Phantasy Star: EotM was one of the best-looking Genesis games and certainly one of the platform's best RPGs, but the franchise was no longer leading the genre the way it used to. Sega needed to get the original team back together, give 'em a huge budget and have them lead the series to greatness with Phantasy Star V on the Sega Saturn. For whatever reason, that did not happen. And suddenly, for no apparent reason, the Phantasy Star series was over. Sure, it was eventually semi-revived with Phantasy Star Online, but few of the principle Phantasy Star creators were involved with that, and PSO barely had a story at all. Phantasy Star Universe did have a story, but...ugh. The popularity of the online games did nothing to revive the single-player franchise, and now all Phantasy Star fans have to look forward to is compilation after compilation from the game's glory days. Which brings us to the game of the moment. Thoughts?

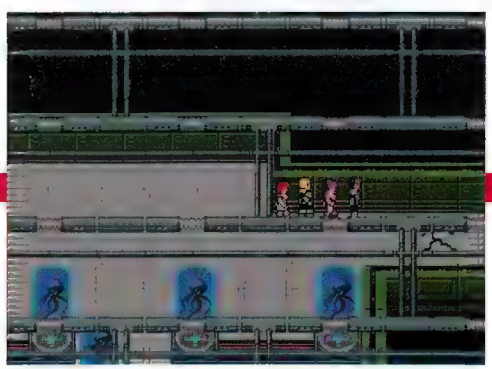
NDB: Best compilation ever, surpassing even the ultra-rare and pricey Japan-only Saturn collection. In fact, I'm not quite sure where to begin. A simple laundry list: PSI, PSII, PSIII, PS: EotM. The hyper-obscure PSII Text Adventures, distributed on Sega's abortive Mega Modem service in 1990. Finally, you even get the little-known Game Gear titles PS Adventure and PS Gaiden as a secret feature (just hold right on the D-Pad when you press Start at the title screen). Every Phantasy Star that had an English translation is on the disc, as are ludicrously extensive archives of artwork for each game. The breadth of sound and display options border on the insane. You can increase walking and battle speed for each title. Game-breaking bugs are fixed—but if you're hardcore enough to demand the exact original experience, you can damn well turn them back on. The manual has essays from Rieko "Phoenix Rie" Kodama and Tooru "Yoshibon" Yoshida, who also drew the new cover artwork. It's a Phantasy Star fetishist's dream, though my sole complaint would be the not entirely accurate Genesis FM sound emulation. But hey, not even the Wii's Virtual Console gets that right.

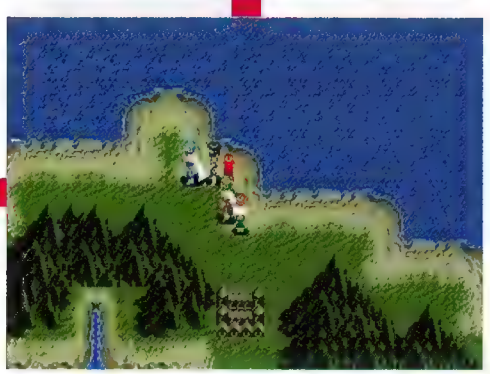
CL: This collection doesn't have all of the bonus assets (notably, FMV of the series' TV commercials) that were in the Saturn one, but the three Japan-only spin-off games are definitely a selling point, even if only Gaiden is any good. However, I am disappointed that this collection doesn't contain the low-budget remakes of Phantasy Star I and II from previous Sega Ages editions—the remake of PSI has some issues, but the remake of PSII was actually pretty good.

Still, I join you in enthusiastically recommending this collection to importers, even ones with no Japanese skills. The menus are all in English, so you won't have any trouble switching the languages of the games (there are no English versions of the Text Adventures or Game Gear games, but that's no big loss). And at around $30 at most import stores, buying this disc is cheaper than it would cost to download all the games of Virtual Console, should they ever become available.

If you haven't experienced the Phantasy Star series before, I wish I could tell you that you'd love it as much as we do, but I doubt the game design achievements of 1988 matter much to younger gamers coming off of modern marvels like Final Fantasy XII and Lost Odyssey. Even so, the uninitiated should still find the Phantasy Star series to be, at the very least, a fascinating curiosity. Its sci-fi setting dodges the usual clichés of early RPGs, the first-person dungeons of the original title offer exciting graph-paper-map opportunities to Etrian Odyssey fans, and the games have a unique tenderness that I'm tempted to attribute to the fact that Phantasy Star is one of the few major gaming franchises created by a woman. There's real magic here, and it isn't entirely due to nostalgia.

> "I was 11 years old, my Genesis pad sprinkled with innocent, glistening boy-tears." —NICK DES BARRES

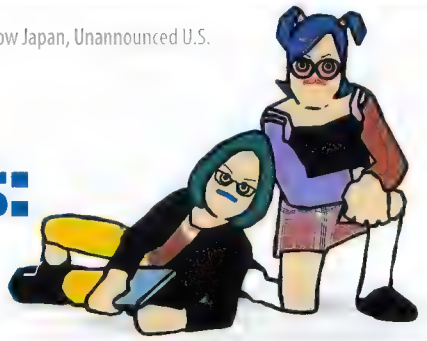




System: Wii | **Developer:** Plus-Heads | **Publisher:** AQ Interactive | **Available:** Now Japan, Unannounced U.S.

The World of Golden Eggs: Nori-Nori Rhythm-Kei

It's not a bra! It's a pictorials major supporter!



words Dai Kohama & Nick Des Barres

I remember my first late-night experience with *The World of Golden Eggs* on Japanese MTV several years ago. It was surreal, it was crazy and it was completely non-mainstream. The show has always been cult in the extreme, so it was rather surprising when its characters recently started showing up first in commercials for NEC laptop PCs, then Nissan cars. Huge stars like Namie Amuro and Anne Suzuki began to appear in cameo roles. The little in-crowd show was suddenly everywhere, and finally, in 2008, *Golden Eggs* has been made into a Wii game.

Licensed games usually suck. It's an unwritten rule: The lower-profile a series, the worse its game is sure to be. How pleasant, then, to find something like The World of Golden Eggs: Nori-Nori Rhythm-Kei, which is as flawless a videogame iteration of the original show as might be imagined. *Golden Eggs* is highly musical (indeed, every named character is a musician of some sort), so it stands to reason that the Wii game is rhythm action—it plays something like a cross between Samba de Amigo (shake your controller to the beat) and Parappa (likewise with buttons). The songs are from the anime, which has a huge library of tunes to draw from, ranging from rock to gospel to country. All are put to excellent use here.

That's what's so smart about Golden Eggs—it's not based on the show, it is the show. In fact, I can't think of any other anime game that does such perfect justice to its license. Essentially a feature-length episode of the series, written by the original creators and with appearances from every character, this Wii game is absolutely indispensable for the fan. It even manages to flawlessly ape the show's (admittedly lo-fi) look.

> "I can't think of any other anime game that does such perfect justice to its license."

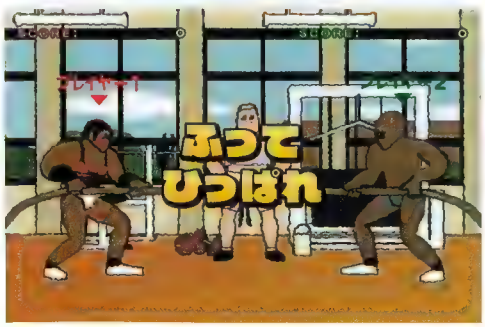
As enjoyable an experience as the game is for the fan, newcomers to the series will likely be baffled. The proceedings are undoubtedly funny, but an encyclopedic knowledge of the anime will be required to appreciate most of the fan service. The game is also very short, at about two hours, and an anemic two-player versus mode does little to help. For the World of Golden Eggs initiate, however, Nori-Nori Rhythm-Kei is far better than it has any right to be.

parting shot

If you have little history with the anime, you're gonna be mighty baffled, as the game is filled with fan service. This is really one of those games that is made for such a niche audience that you have to go in with an open mind. There's absolutely nothing like it; it is the show.

What is *The World of Golden Eggs*?

The World of Golden Eggs is a brilliant, low-tech late-night cult anime that runs on various Japanese cable channels. Acting as a parody of American shows like *South Park* and *The Simpsons*, *Golden Eggs* is set in Turkey's Hill, a roughly Midwestern subu that nonetheless uses yen as its currency and crumbling medieval castle ruins within walking distance of its high school. Like *South Park*, entire voice cast consists of two people—kn only as "Larry" and "Monica," both men—v memorably perform dozens of lunatic cha Particularly popular are Lisa and Rebecca of utterly clueless social outcasts at Turke Hill High, Kevin and Paul, two bluegrass-s turkeys who want nothing more than to know female fowl's touch before they get slau and the inimitable Turkey Ranger, the popular children's show who vanquishes his rubber-suited foes with impressive-s special moves like the "Ranger Sli Shock" and "Ranger Micronesian Eggs is designed to appeal to Jap American pop culture primarily th television, and in turn is amusing viewer, as much for what it get it gets wrong. It's frankly sho *Eggs* hasn't been licensed fo yet—virtually the entire mar is already subtitled in Englis and YouTube *The World o* what you see, import the



System: Nintendo DS | **Developer:** Marionette | **Publisher:** Global A Entertainment | **Available:** Now Japan, Unannounced U.S.

The World Revolves Around Me (Sekai wa Atashi de Mawatteru)

Wow...the world really does revolve around the Nintendo DS!

words Nick Des Barres

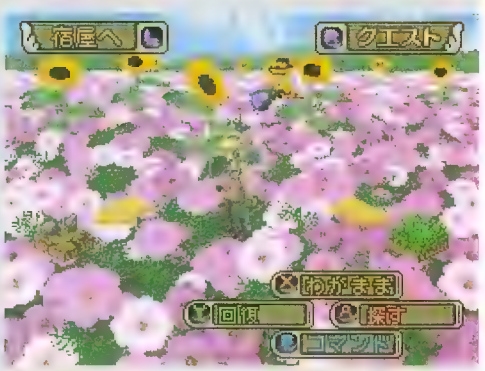
Nintendo DS hyper-saturation irks me, but I love the fact that its sheer ubiquitousness has allowed for the revival of "dead" genres like text adventures and dungeon RPGs. The World Revolves Around Me is the latest iteration of this trend, a charming little solo RPG that feels for all the world like a Sega Saturn game, circa 1995.

A billion no-name games are released for the DS every week in Japan, generally treading the line between mediocre and awful. The World Revolves Around Me marks a rare example of one of these *venati non grata* rising above the rest of the dreck, and it could not come at a more welcome time. Shovelware threatens to suffocate Japanese handheld gaming, and only quality software like TWRAM, coming from second-tier publishers like Global A, can save it.

TWRAM's premise is a cute riff on a time-worn RPG cliché that dates right back to Dragon Quest I: A beautiful princess falls for a dashing young low-born adventurer. The difference here is that you're the princess, and the master adventurer (he's Lv 99!) utterly spurns you within the first five minutes of the game. The princess doesn't have skillz, she's terribly spoiled and the object of her affection won't show her the time of day until she proves herself an adventuress. Cut to the next day, as the princess leaves the castle she's called home her entire life, hair freshly shorn, all for the purpose of proving to the rude young adventurer that pampered royalty can be just as gangsta as rough-and-tumble warriors. This princess will have her way, damn it.

The quaintly simple premise sets up an equally simple game, following the JRPG model stringently, save for two key points. During her quest the princess will meet a Mimic Slime, a curious creature acting as her second party member. The Mimic Slime can "imitate" the traits of enemy monsters, building stats as well as gaining access to new equipment. Even more interesting are the abilities of the princess herself—in addition to plain old MP, the princess has WP, "Wagamama Points." Wagamama means "selfishness" or "indulgence," and by merely being willful enough to want something very badly, our heroine can invoke her WP to lower enemy levels, make them drop more items, change terrain to gain elemental advantages, or even skip quests entirely on the grounds that they're too boring!

TWRAM's main story is delightfully frothy and pared-down, providing a welcome respite from the usual



all-hell-breaks-loose, save-the-universe scenarios of most JRPGs. In contrast to the no-frills plot, however, presentation is far better than might be reasonably expected from a tiny publisher like Global A. Visuals are gorgeous, both the hand-drawn 2-D characters and full 3-D dungeons. Most impressive is the battle engine, with excellently modeled and textured enemies unleashing all manner of pyrotechnic, alpha-blended attacks. Similarly, the music is remarkably pleasant for DS, hailing from the late '80s/early '90s school of densely melodic, looping tracks.

In a world where literally hundreds of examples of inexcusable DS pabulum see release every quarter, something like The World Revolves Around Me is an out-and-out wonder. It's solid as a rock, refreshingly optimistic, looks and sounds great and is unlike any other RPG on the platform. The most incredible thing about TWRAM is that it comes from a generally unknown studio, which, logic suggests, would translate into relatively moderate overseas licensing fees. Atlus, NIS, Xseed, I'm looking at you!

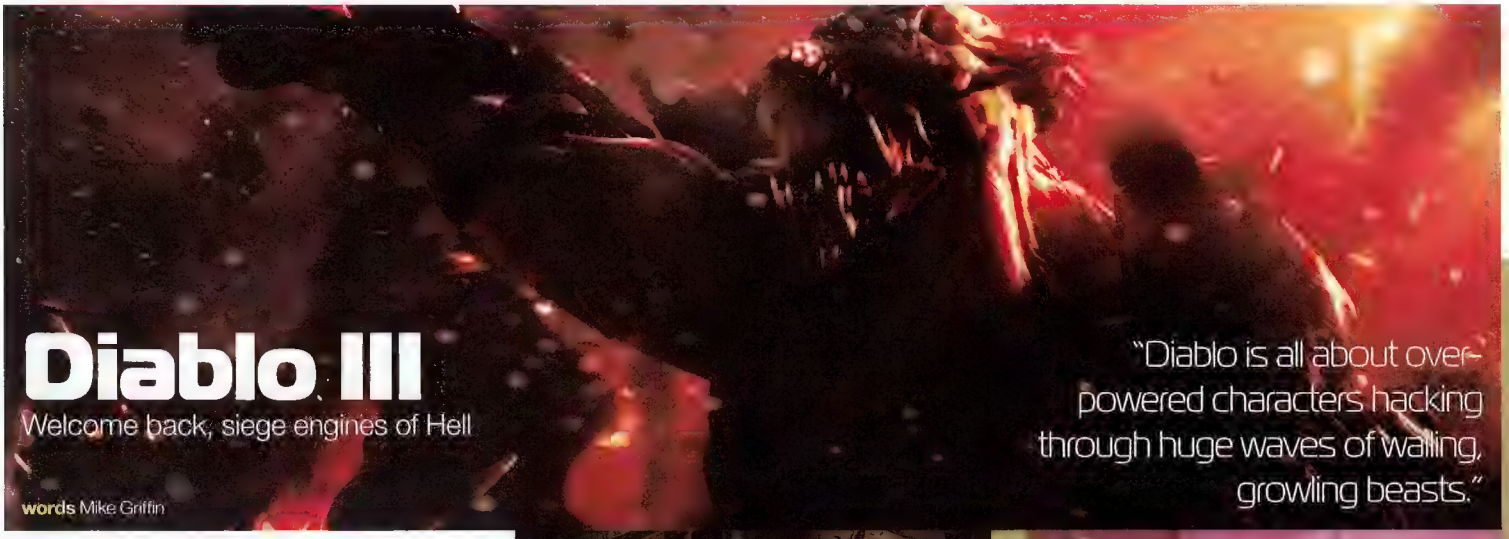
parting shot

A refreshing change from the JRPG conventions that every other game in the genre seems to follow, with excellent tech and surprising freedom. Fairly simple to get through and not very challenging, but the unique mise-en-scène more than makes up for these shortcomings.

www.playmagazine.com

preview

System: PC / Mac **Developer:** Blizzard **Publisher:** Blizzard **Multi:** Co-op, PvP **Available:** TBA



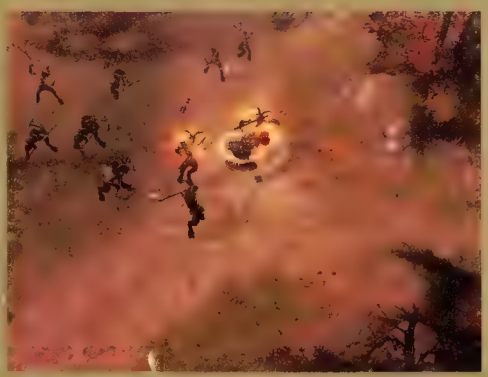
Diablo III

Welcome back, siege engines of Hell

words Mike Griffin

"Diablo is all about over-powered characters hacking through huge waves of wailing, growling beasts."

Blizzard is aiming for an M rating, so expect to bathe in the blood of mongrels.



For years the term "Diablo-like" has rolled off my fingers like a battle drum, as an army of action RPG clones marched onto hard drives, usually equipped with paper thin armor and rusty swords. Only the Titan Quest games managed to approach Diablo II's wonderful production values and subgenre-defining gameplay. TQ is probably toast, as its disbanded developer Iron Lore is now a piece of game industry history. Good games never die though; just ask Blizzard. The empire of WoW is assembling the most Diablo-like game of them all, a thousand pounder by the name of Diablo III, back to establish the trilogy.

Blizzard is preaching these main tenets when it comes to Diablo III: Large scale combat and massively powerful classes. Demonstrating the classic isometric perspective and superior character animation we've come to expect of Diablo games, large scale combat in D3 is now a modernized spectacle of ancillary interactions: destructible bits abound, enemies—such as flesh-hungry Ghouls—climb up and over walls and objects to reach you, not merely shambling along staid lines of collision, while the walls themselves can be turned against the horde, dashing ragdoll bones beneath tons of collapsed granite in a physics-enhanced display.

Blizzard's global appeal is part of its pedigree, as reliable as the developer's casual "When it's done" attitude towards release dates. Some 4 years into development as of this summer's announcement, the third Diablo game once again nails that East and West sweet spot, destined for mass appeal with artful environments, character designs and animation, while retaining the low-to-mid system spec entry point of its predecessors. The DX9 shader grade requires even less resources than the older, but still impressive-looking Titan Quest, and where Diablo III skips the parallax mapping, it compensates with wonderful touches of atmosphere, lighting and the aforementioned large scale combat.

Another Titan Quest reference is Diablo III's new quick ability swap via the mouse wheel, sort of replacing the potion belt. In fact, the whole business of non-stop health and mana potion quaffing has been diminished in D3. Early gameplay demonstrated the Barbarian, one of two confirmed classes, running into a rotund Grotesque zombie. The fat man shits out a swarm of Lampreys (think land eels), taking a toll on the warrior's life. Lo and behold, following the Barbarian's brutal Whirlwind attacks, dead monsters start dropping red globes that provide an instant health boost on walkover—Diablo III's new pacemaker, so to speak.

Crowd control is another new focus in D3, further altering—and improving—the flow of action. The second new class is the Witch Doctor, a disease controlling, locust swarming magic user who exemplifies mob manipulation in Diablo III. He can use Mass Confuse to take control of targets, the Horrify skill to fear all nearby foes, and perhaps most visually pleasing, Wall of Zombies: an impenetrable fence of newly risen rotten flesh, the zombies' lower limbs still firmly rooted in soil. Diablo is all about over-powered characters hacking through huge waves of wailing, growling beasts, so a Witch Doctor can also invest considerable skill points into a straightforward crowd-scorching Fireball attack.

Kicking off with an all-new version of Battle.net, Blizzard's free and (usually) secure multiplayer hub, Diablo III will shine as a small party co-op action RPG. And like recent multiplayer RPGs, each party member has their own personal loot table, so there's no ninja looting. Though much remains to be seen of D3's quests and instances, there's a tantalizing new "Adventure" system that can auto-generate dungeons complete with multi-part quests and events, like trailing dark cultists to a dungeon ritual, or escorting a caravan through dark, ancient woods. It's all about massive replayability, endless loot, and randomization with depth. To the depths of Hell, that is. Diablo is back.

System: PC | Developer: Spicy Horse | Publisher: Turner | Multi: N/A | Available: July

American McGee's Grimm

preview

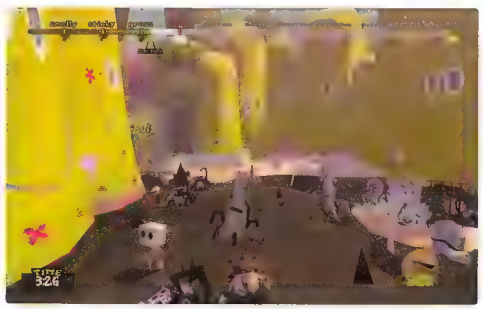
Make it smelly

The cynical and sinister Grimm loves it when things are stinky, gross, foul, rotten, nasty, disgusting, repulsive, putrid, rancid and ultimately vile, and his best moments are spent painting the world in the hues of that celebration, one butt stomp at a time. To sample this transformative experience, Turner and GameTap provided us with a three episode hands-on play test of American McGee's Grimm, a truly bizarre dissection and re-imagining of classic fairy tales.

Many of you will have sampled the fist episode, A Boy Learns What Fear Is. If you thought the narrative was strange in that one, get ready to see it snap in episode two, Little Red Riding Hood. Spicy Horse is sort of pushing the boundaries of weirdness here. The puppet theatre portions are sometimes brilliantly narrated as Grimm dissects every character's darkest motivations, and as men speak in high pitch voices for female characters. In the dark theatre version of Riding Hood, Little Red's mother starts off by saying:"Ya lazy slut, go see your granny!" and asks her to steal some goodies. At times the humor is so rollickingly sardonic and bitter that it's bound to go over some heads. Not mine. By episode three, The Fisherman and His Wife, I knew I wanted to see all 23 episodes. There's a certain conviction in Grimm's acidic observations that I find necessary.

As for the 45 minutes or so of gameplay in each downloadable episode (GameTap), to paraphrase McGee: It's like Katamari Damacy, except you're transforming the world into a more putrid place. The platforming and butt stomping aren't especially demanding, so you'll be able to appreciate the interesting light-to-dark environment transformations that Grimm's vileness produces. **Mike Griffin**

> "It's like Katamari Damacy, except you're transforming the world into a more putrid place."



Grimm squirts a little pee into the Wolf's stomach juices. Gross.

System: PC | Developer: City Interactive | Publisher: City Interactive | Multi: 16p Deathmatch, Team DM | Available: July

Code of Honor 2

preview

Call in the French

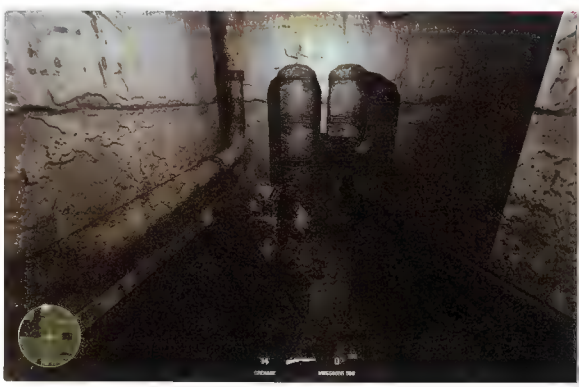
For a budget FPS steeped in banality, it handles the shooing part fairly well.

Sergeant Claude Boulet is back! Who the hell is Sergeant Claude Boulet, you ask? He's part of a special commando unit of the French Foreign Legion in City Interactive's Code of Honor 2. Claude & squad have been sent to Ile Royale (Royal Island) off the coast of French Guiana, a penal colony in decades past, now home to a small nuclear reactor facility. Terrorist leader Hernando Mendoza and a crew of faithful in the Global Revolutionary Front have infiltrated the facility, slaughtered all the white coats, and taken control of the reactor—threatening to blow it sky high if ransoms aren't met. The nuclear fallout would kill millions. Monsieur Boulet must save the day in first-person combat.

I played through a near final version of CoH 2 and was entertained, despite all odds. The Jupiter EX engine is at work here and I feel a heavy influence from the tactical FPS gameplay of F.E.A.R., the engine's prized shooter. Even the office levels deeper into CoH 2 look eerily similar to those in the aforementioned game. Character modeling pales next to Monolith's acronymed gem, but there are some rather good-looking interior sections in Code of Honor 2 and it's all nicely optimized. Like F.E.A.R., CoH 2's enemy squad AI provides an engaging bit of tactical FPS fluff.

A lot of Polish developers (teams like Metropolis and People Can Fly) have a good feel for FPS action and an ability to build rather large games on tiny budgets. This City Interactive team is slowly improving, and they've found a pretty steady action rhythm for CoH 2 that pierces through the murk of its ultra-generic world design and plot delivery. **Mike Griffin**

> "...they've found a pretty steady action rhythm for CoH 2 that pierces through the murk."



Ask Alienware®

#025 | 08_08

Escape the heat behind the comforting shade of your PC monitor with this month's tips and info. We bury artifacts beneath ultra-high-res PC gaming, discuss PC versus next-gen consoles and how DirectX 10.1 stomps aliasing.

q. What resolution is going to come after 2560x1600 pixels? It seems like this is the current "high end" for widescreen PC gaming. I guess the next question is: What's it going to take—in terms of graphics hardware—to render at such high resolutions? Also, when stuff is extremely high-res like that, it should inherently display *less* aliasing artifacts, requiring less video card AA—is that right?
Chuck, NC

PC gaming is a heavenly experience at beyond "full HD" resolutions like 2560x1600 on one of the lovely 30-inch LCD monitors on the market. The more pixels and details you stuff onto the screen, the less aliasing artifacts you'll have to contend with. Naturally, all this wondrous eye candy will require a brawny graphics card to drive your applications at such extreme resolutions.

Alienware: Ultimately, you're limited by the amount of pixels in the screen itself more than the capability of PC graphics hardware, which simply adheres to display spec standards but could theoretically output at greater resolutions. You are right about higher resolutions containing less aliasing artifacts, thus requiring less AA. By adding all those pixels, your renderings are smaller, more dense by nature, so you'll see more in the final image; there's more information in the picture, so the "jaggies" are less likely to appear. You won't have to pile on as much anti-aliasing, but of course the option is always there—even at 2560x1600 resolution. So think of AA as an extra feature, rather than part of the resolution spec. As for what resolutions may come after 2560x1600, we could run the numbers and offer some guesses, but this current high standard for PC widescreen gaming will be around for at least four to five more years. Currently the screens that support 2560x1600 are 30-inch panels, so you'd likely have to go beyond that size to get a higher resolution, or lower, which is highly unlikely at that pixel depth.

q. Back during the PS1 and N64 era, those consoles were miles behind PC gaming, even mid-range PC gaming. Later during the heyday of PS2 and Xbox 1, PC still held a sizable advantage. Nowadays, however, games on the Xbox 360 and PS3 are remarkably powerful. To play a game like Grand Theft Auto IV on computer, for example, I bet that version would require a lot more than a mid-range PC. How long before PC gaming widens the gap again between it and console?
Nick, AL

One day we may see GTA IV on PC, and it won't require a monster rig to run Liberty City.

Alienware: The rift between PC gaming and consoles like the Xbox 360 and PS3 is already huge today. It's already incredibly wide. We're talking about PCs that can easily handle terabytes and multitask teraflops of data. Of course, some of these consoles are pushing some powerful hardware, but the difference is that this hardware inherently ages, and all the current consoles' hardware is already several years old. When companies like Microsoft and Sony are developing their consoles, by the time the machine launches, the graphics cards and processors they use are already a couple of years old. To play a game like Grand Theft Auto IV on a modern PC would likely *not* require more than a mid-range PC, and remember that PC always has the advantage in terms of flexibility, allowing users a wide range of settings. You could probably tweak it to look just as good as console, running just as smoothly—if not better. We'd say that PC has already widened the gap again; you can, for example, already play PC games at resolutions that probably won't be achieved by consoles for another 10 years.

q. What does Alienware think about Microsoft's DirectX 10.1? It sure didn't take long for MS to release an updated version, sort of like the path they followed with DX 9. One of the big deals with 10.1 that caught my eye is 4x anti-aliasing. Isn't AA extremely costly on performance? Especially for those mid-range DX10 cards that aren't clocked as high as the big boys, like GeForce 9800. Why would Microsoft want to enforce such a strict AA spec? Is it because 4x AA is super efficient in DX 10.1?
Doug, CO

"Anti-aliasing is always going to be fairly costly on performance."

Get ready to experience more DX 10 thrills this fall in Crytek's Crysis Warhead.

Alienware: To answer your question, Microsoft's DirectX 10.1 does offer anti-aliasing at 4x. It's not a standard, however. So you can turn off or lower the anti-aliasing depending on what game or application you're running. It's basically just a patch: It's making DX 10 better by supporting 4x anti-aliasing, but it isn't turning on 4x anti-aliasing by default when you're running a DX 10 game. Anti-aliasing is always going to be fairly costly on performance, as it asks the hardware to render out a scene multiple times, hence terms like "4x anti-aliasing." AA is basically rendering a duplicate image, overlapping itself so that jagged lines fill in and appear straighter in the final image you see. Unfortunately, 4x AA isn't "super efficient" in DX 10.1, and if you're going to run DX 10 games with that much AA enabled, you should indeed have a graphics card in the 9800 spec range from Nvidia, or the 3000 series from ATi.

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Top 10 Selling PC Games May 2008

01	The Sims 2 Kitchen & Bath Interior Design Stuff Expansion Pack	EA
02	The Sims 2 Double Deluxe	EA
03	Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	Activision
04	World of Warcraft: Battle Chest	Vivendi
05	The Sims 2 FreeTime Expansion Pack	EA
06	World Of Warcraft	Vivendi
07	World Of Warcraft: Burning Crusade Expansion Pack	Vivendi
08	Sins Of A Solar Empire	Stardock
09	Assassin's Creed: Director's Cut Edition	Ubisoft
10	Crysis	EA

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

Crysis

OCZ talks about how they gear up for LAN Season

OCZ Technology, an expert in tweaking and squeezing every ounce of performance out of RAM, has been a leader in the memory market since 2002. Founded by gamers for gamers, OCZ has since been on a mission to deliver the very best PC gaming products to the masses.

If the summer for you means all-night gaming and living off pepperoni pizza and heavily-caffeinated beverages, then you must be a LAN Party junkie. As a gamer-centric company, OCZ knows a thing or two about sponsoring these unique functions. Jessica Luken, Global Marketing Manager, talks about why OCZ takes LAN parties as seriously as you do.

Why does OCZ attend LAN parties?
Taking the OCZ spirit to the grassroots level is one of the most rewarding parts of my job. LAN Parties give us a chance to speak directly to the end user and learn about what type of hardware they are looking for to enhance their gaming experience as well showcase some of our OCZ products designed specifically for gamers. It also gives us a chance to get out of the office and have some fun!

What goes on at a LAN Party when OCZ attends?
Prizes, prizes, prizes! Let's just say we are all about gamers who don't shy away from public humiliation. We like to cover attendees in OCZ temporary tattoos (anywhere on the face gets extra props), have games of twister with booth babes, karaoke to Madonna's "Like a Virgin," and standby as gamers proclaim their devotion to OCZ to the entire venue. My favorite form of torture is of course dressing the guys up as pretty princesses! Those are among my proudest moments.

What is the craziest thing a gamer has done for an OCZ product?
When I first started at OCZ I attended a LAN party in Texas. A gamer came up to me and proposed to let me shave "O-C-Z" on the back of his head for an OCZ power supply. From that moment on, I knew I was working for a company that is passionate about making great products!

How can I get OCZ to sponsor some swag or prizes for my LAN?
You can visit our Gamers Collective website and submit a request form: www.ocztechnology.com/lanparty

Want some OCZ swag for your own room? Email contest@ocztechnology.com and tell us in 100 words or less your idea of a fun challenge or contest for a LAN event. Submit your idea by August 23rd. Winners will be chosen at random.

www.dayfmagazine.com

System: Sega CD **Developer:** Konami **Publisher:** Konami **Release:** November 30, 1994

snatcher

The birth of Metal Gear

words Greg Sewart

June 6, 1996: A mysterious explosion destroys the Chernoton research facility near Moscow. Lucifer Alpha, a powerful biological weapon under secret development there, is released into the atmosphere, creating a deadly biohazard. Carried by the trade winds, Lucifer Alpha spreads throughout Eastern Europe and Eurasia, destroying 80% of the populace. Half of the world's people die. The greatest biohazard in history later becomes known simply as 'the Catastrophe.' But at this time, who could have possibly imagined that the ultimate biohazard wouldn't appear for another half-century?"

So begins one of the most beloved cyber-punk adventures in videogame history. Released in North America in 1994, Snatcher was *Blade Runner* meets *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, with a little bit of *Terminator* thrown into the mix. It was vindication for gamers who had stuck with the beleaguered Sega CD console—a game that showcased what the term "interactive movie" *really* meant, not the full-motion-video schlock foisted on the industry for the previous couple of years.

Is it any wonder that it came from none other than Hideo Kojima? Though he's since proven himself a master of the digital, cinematic style so wonderfully demonstrated in his Metal Gear Solid series, Snatcher really offers some of the earliest glimpses of what was to come from this now superstar game designer. A story-heavy adventure with loads of exposition, meticulous attention to each scientific detail, imaginative plot twists, and even a sprinkling of sexual humor will make any MGS fan right at home in the world of Snatcher.

> "Is it any wonder that it came from none other than Hideo Kojima?"

Of course, back in 1994, not many North Americans knew who Hideo Kojima was. His only previous release on these shores was the butchered NES version of Metal Gear, and that was a full seven years before Snatcher reached this side of the world. Ever since the release of Metal Gear Solid, though, the cult status of Snatcher has seemed to grow to magnificent proportions.

Snatcher follows the exploits of Gillian Seed, amnesia sufferer and newly minted JUNKER—Japanese Undercover Neuro Kinetic Elimination Ranger (or Judgement Uninfected Naked Kind and Execute Ranger, if you were playing in Japanese)—on his first case. The city of Neo Kobe has been overrun with beings known as Snatchers. These robots appear mostly in winter, killing humans and assuming their identities, and are the sole reason for the existence of the JUNKER task force.

It is the year 2047. Gillian and his wife Jamie were recently discovered in the Siberian wilderness, with absolutely no recollection of their past, or why they were found in a room with three sleeping pods. As "snatcher" is the only thing that sounds familiar to them, Gillian thinks joining JUNKER might help bring their past back to them.

No sooner does Gillian show up for his first day of work than his fellow "runner," Jean Jack Gibson, sends in a distressed call for backup. But by the time Gillian

Hideo Kojima ponders his next big hit.

Incredible Journey

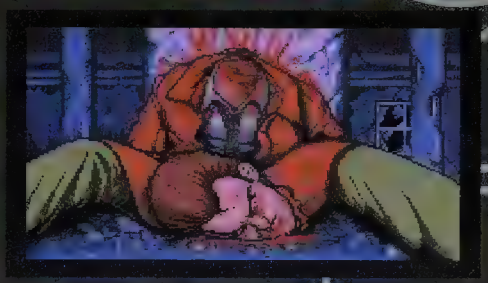
Although Snatcher only appeared on the Sega CD here in the U.S., it made quite a few other stops in the rest of the world:

November 1988 Snatcher is first released on floppy disk for the NEC PC-8801 personal computer in Japan. **December 1988** Snatcher is released on floppy disk for the MSX2 computer platform. The game comes with a special audio cartridge. Also only available in Japan. **April 1990** SD Snatcher is released on the MSX2. This remake featured a reimagining of the original story, a lot more gameplay and some RPG play mechanics. It also featured a different ending. Again, available only in Japan. **October 1992** Snatcher is remade on CD-ROM for the PC Engine in Japan. This update features voice acting for the more pivotal scenes, as well as an act 3, which featured the ending that was originally planned for PC versions, but not included due to time constraints. **December 1994** Snatcher comes to America and Europe on the Sega CD. This one and only English-language version was ported from the PC-Engine CD-ROM, and was intended entirely for Western audiences. **February/March 1996** Snatcher is re-released in Japan on the Sony PlayStation and Sega Saturn platforms.

Lost In Translation

Gamers in 1994 were ecstatic to find that the decidedly adult story and visuals in Snatcher remained mostly untouched in the English language version. However, there were a few bits left on the cutting room floor:

All dates were moved forward five years. Originally "the Catastrophe" occurred in 1991. But the Sega CD version of the game didn't come out until 1994.
Katrina Gibson's age was changed from 14 to 18. As the young lady has a shower scene and is the subject of Gillian's advances, it made sense to make her a tad more legal.
No more wardrobe malfunctions—in the American game, a few breast shots were covered up.
When the dog Alice is sliced open in the Japanese version, her insides are still quivering when Gillian examines her. In the U.S. game, she's completely still.
The customers in Outer Heaven were changed from classic, sci-fi movie characters to classic Konami videogame characters for copyright reasons.
On the plus side, the Sega CD version supported Konami's Justifier light gun for the shooting bits.



Metal Gear Connection

Not surprisingly, the stories of both Snatcher and Metal Gear are connected. Here are some examples:
Chernoton, Russia Site of the mysterious explosion that preceded "the Catastrophe" in Snatcher; original intended target of a nuclear strike to be launched by Liquid Snake and Metal Gear Rex in Metal Gear Solid.
Metal Gear Mk.II Gillian Seed's robot assistant—"navigator"—in Snatcher, which was named and designed after the "Metal Gear menace of the late 20th century"; Old Snake's robotic assistant in Metal Gear Solid 4, designed after the TX-55 Metal Gear seen in the original MSX game.
Outer Heaven Name of a trendy Neo Kobe night club where the customers dress up like Konami characters in Snatcher; name of the mercenary country that was the site of Solid Snake's first mission in the original Metal Gear.
FOXHOUND Chief Benson Cunningham, head of JUNKER operations, mentions that he was once FOXHOUND's strategist; the interrogation specialist in Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops is also named Cunningham; Solid Snake undertakes his first two missions as a member of FOXHOUND in Metal Gear and Metal Gear 2; Special Forces Unit FOXHOUND is responsible for terrorist action on Shadow Moses Island in Metal Gear Solid.
Dr. Pettrovich Modnar Russian scientist and father of the "Snatcher" project, seen as a very old man near the end of Snatcher; original designer of the TX-55 Metal Gear in Metal Gear; kept Big Boss alive after his defeat by Solid Snake as a part of his "Snatcher" project following the events of Metal Gear; defected to Zanzibar Land to develop Metal Gear D in Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake; was revealed as the man who kept Raiden alive preceding the events of Metal Gear Solid 4.

Characters

Gillian Seed Rookie JUNKER and star of the game. Gillian was found in the Siberian wilderness three years ago with his wife Jamie; both were suffering from amnesia. Gillian joins JUNKER in an attempt to get his memory back.
Jamie Seed Gillian's soon-to-be ex-wife. After being discovered in Siberia, Gillian and Jamie have grown apart, though they still have feelings for each other. Jamie works at Neo Kobe's biggest pharmaceutical company.
Mika Slayton Works the front desk at JUNKER HQ. Mika remains a source of advice and consolation throughout Gillian's investigation.
Benson Cunningham Chief of JUNKER operations. Cunningham monitors Gillian's investigation in real-time through Metal Gear. Also has a weird thing for bad art.
Harry Benson JUNKER's crusty old technician. He created Metal Gear Mk.II, as well as Gillian's blaster. He's an orphan who never knew his parents, and loves old pop music (as evidenced by his poster).
Jean Jack Gibson Veteran JUNKER who used to be a science cop. Jean is on the verge of a major breakthrough in the Snatcher case when Gillian joins the group.
Katrina Gibson Jean Jack's 18-year-old daughter. Growing up as the daughter of a JUNKER, Katrina is a lot tougher than she looks. She's also a model.
Metal Gear Mk.II Gillian's "navigator," Metal Gear assists in all aspects of the investigation, including logging evidence and scientifically analyzing anything and everything.
Random Hajile Bounty hunter. As the Snatcher epidemic spirals out of control, the government has called on private contractors to hunt down and destroy suspected Snatchers.
Napoleon Jean Jack Gibson's chief informant. Napoleon also holds down lots of other jobs, including doorman at the city's hottest night club, and playing Santa Claus down at Alton Plaza.
Elijah Modnar Son of Dr. Pettrovich Modnar, and somehow linked to Gillian, Jamie and their cloudy past.

arrives at Jean's location, he's too late. All he finds is Gibson's corpse. It seems the veteran JUNKER was on to something big, and it's Seed's job to pick up where Gibson left off. The ensuing story brings to light everything from why Jean was killed to the Snatchers' master plan, to what exactly happened during "the Catastrophe." Who are Gillian and Jamie Seed, really? What happened to the third person in those sleeping pods? These and so many more questions are answered.

As with most of his other games, Kojima's sense of humor shines through in Snatcher. Hero Gillian is a ladies' man, to put it lightly, and spends as much time hitting on the women in the game as he does questioning them. Various nods to the game's obvious influences are all around as well, from the movie-quality masks produced by "Rick Bakery" to lines lifted directly from *The Terminator* ("They can sweat, and even bleed") to jokes about searching a bathtub for snake scales.

As the game progresses, you end up playing less and watching more, much like the Metal Gear Solid saga. Snatcher's ending sequence clocks in at over 30 minutes, and is fully voiced. This was almost unheard of back in 1994. And just like the Metal Gear games, the voice talent seemed to be considered just as important as the game's characters, as each actor was introduced in the opening sequence. Snatcher really was an early example of where storytelling in videogames was about to go.

Snatcher is a true classic. It's a shame that the English language version was restricted to a system that didn't have a massive user base. Still, if you've played all of the Metal Gear games inside and out and find yourself craving more of Kojima's style of art, this game is definitely worth finding.

www.playmagazine.com

Released By: Warner Premiere / DC Comics | **Running Time:** 76 minutes (2 disc Special Edition 140 min.) | **Rating:** PG-13 | **Available:** Now

Batman Gotham Knight

Batman *really* animated

words Dave Halverson

No matter how good the writing or captivating the comic, American TV and DVD superhero animation has always been synonymous with poor quality and abysmal character design. There are exceptions, such as DC Comic's Justice League: The New Frontier, and Warner Bros.' *The Batman* and *Teen Titans*, but more often than not animated superhero adaptations fall flat. Check out just about any Marvel animated feature and you'll see what I mean (and I double dare you to look upon the horror that is *Turok: Son of Stone*, the animated equivalent of a Uwe Boll videogame franchise crucifixion).

All the while the Japanese anime industry in America has all but imploded on itself by marketing to the tiny segment of Americans willing to part with a hundred bucks to follow the 200th series about teenagers defending Japan in giant robots. It came to a point where there was so much anime on the shelves that the truly great shows and series got lost in shuffle. The solution to both of these problems lies in projects like *Batman: Gotham Knight*. These stories, penned by some of the best writers in entertainment today, would never resonate as they do here had they been produced in the traditional American/Korean fashion. In the hands of Japan's anime masters, however, they are avant-garde masterpieces by way of visuals that enhance the dialogue rather than disgrace it. Of the six segments, Josh Olson's *Have I Got a Story for You* directed by Shojiro Niahimi of Studio 4°C brought me to my knees, but then again so did *A History of Violence*, so he's two-for-two in my book. I still can't believe DC

"Josh Olson's 'Have I Got a Story for You' brought me to my knees."

allowed it—bravo to them for having the gumption to let the Bat spread his wings. David Goyer's *In Darkness Dwells* directed by MADHOUSE's Yasuhiro Aoki, and Alan Burnett's *Deadshot*, also by MADHOUSE (only this one has Kawajiri written all over it), are also simply amazing. Production I.G.'s entry, Greg Rucka's *Crossfire*, directed by Futoshi Higashide, is another highpoint; and last but not least, Brian Azzarello's *Working Through Pain*, another Studio 4°C entry (directed by Toshiyuki Kubooka) and Jordan Goldberg's *Field Test*, directed by Hiroshi Morioka from Bee Train, Inc. round out the six features.

It's going to be interesting to see how comic book fans receive *Gotham Knight*. It's certainly not what they're used to. It's hard to part with that first car even though it may be a rundown Beetle, but guys...the Ferrari, she is magnificent.

Presented By: Funimation | Running Time: [illegible] | Language: [illegible] | Rating: TV-MA | Available: Now

Desert Punk Thinpak

Enter Sandman

words Bill Gray

Kanta Mizuno, better known as "Desert Punk," has a fearsome reputation in post-apocalyptic Japan. A member of the "Handyman" Guild, he's known for taking on any job and seeing it through to completion—no matter what the cost. He's also a spoiled, self-centered seventeen-year old with a filthy mouth and an even dirtier mind. It's this side of him that gets him into trouble again and again, and what makes *Desert Punk* the series such a hoot to watch, as you're never far from a complex gun battle or the cheesecake fantasy of a teenage boy's mind.

The series opens with DP's raging hormones proving his undoing, when he bumps into an <anem> *generously* endowed rival mercenary named Junko on one of his missions. She uses her bazoombas to snatch the credit for completing the mission away from Kanta, resulting in his first-ever failed mission. Funimation's handy new box set collects all 24 episodes of the series, letting you wander though the wasteland with Desert Punk as he restores his lost reputation. He even picks up an apprentice and meets a host of zany friends and foes along the way. Kanta's (mis)adventures are surprisingly hilarious, ranging from protecting a village from bandits, *Seven Samurai*-style, to taking on an evil dog-woman-spirit with nothing but his libido.

Desert Punk's crass humor, surprisingly well-conceived world, and detailed action make it one of the [illegible]east—sorry—best anime series of 2006, and a worthy thinpak pickup in 2008.

"[illegible] never far from a complex gun battle or the cheesecake fantasy of a teenage boy's mind."

Released By: FUNimation | Running Time: 100 minutes | Episodes: XXXXX | Rating: TV-PG | Available: July

xxxHolic

Now with more noodles

words Dave Halverson

It took awhile but *xxxHolic* finally hit a speed bump. It was bound to happen sooner or later (every series has its mid-season slump) and happily this one's not a deal breaker. The trouble is primarily the formula, which is aging faster than Old Snake: Random civilian is possessed by an evil spirit, Watanuki gets caught in the middle, various escalations and mischief ensues, Yuko steps in at just the right moment and saves the day leaving behind a lesson or clever metaphor. In between Watanuki acts like he's never seen a girl before whenever Himawara is around, constantly lashes out at his guardian/classmate Domeki (who hasn't had an emotion since the doctor slapped him on the butt) and cooks alot. The central plot that makes *xxxHolic* so enticing (Watanuki being lured into Yuko's web to become her slave in exchange for her services exorcising his demons) seems to have temporarily meandered into a more casual realm. Watanuki is almost acceptant of his invisible stalkers here, and seems more concerned with getting a little respect. There are a few moments of mystery here and there but nothing near as haunting or disturbing as we've become accustomed to. It doesn't help matters that episodes 14 and 15 are combined to flesh-out a storyline second only to watching paint dry. You know they're dragging the bottom of the lake when the big hook is that "words are alive." I'm surprised that Clamp would write something so dull let alone stretch it out. Another problem is that Yuko—the main reason I watch *xxxHolic*—is rarely in this volume, and when she is she's more mother hen than clever witch. And what's with the characters? They're elongated to a disturbing degree as it is, so why are their bodies getting longer and their heads smaller? Yuko's bosoms tend to swell from scene to scene too, but no complaints there. On the plus side (always a light at the end of the tunnel), Watanuki goes to DEFCON 9 on the drama queen scale, making him the most entertaining completely annoying character ever—and Yuko's Pipe Fox is straight out of Okami.

Either you get it.

As Seen on The Tonight Show and Conan O'Brien

Or you don't.

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Alienware m15x

The Alienware m15x notebook is a stunning portable PC featuring some of the best gaming and media hardware on the market. Available with up to 4 GB of memory and 500 GB of on board hard drive space, the Core 2 Duo-powered m15x can be equipped with a GeForce 8600M GT, 8700M GT, or a monster 512-meg 8800 GTX. Yet it's surprisingly thin and has a strong, stable build. The m15x accompanied us on a trip to Korea, and its Stealth Mode provided plenty of unplugged battery life for work in the field.

Next to its many USB and media card readers you'll find a convenient HDMI output for an incredibly easy connection to your living room's HDTV. Below the m15x' own lovely high-definition 15.4-inch LCD screen is a pleasantly minimal touchpad array that provides elegant control of audio, wireless and Alien FX lighting functions. Six light zones can be customized with different colors, vibrance and patterns. The m15x represents a maturing Alienware, embracing superior contemporary design and function. *MG*

Fanatec Porsche 911 Turbo Wheel

For a considerable $350, you can own Fanatec's Porsche 911 Turbo Wheel, currently the best PS3/PC-compatible racing wheel peripheral on the market. The wheel is thicker and higher quality than Logitech's G25, and Fanatec's force feedback engine is stronger, more convincing. The Porsche wheel also has a proper vibration motor. The wheel piece has every controller button and includes on board configuration settings for sensitivity and feedback, and it connects securely to the shifter. You can clamp the wheel to a table, or use the included lap wings. We loved Fanatec's decision to make the Porsche Turbo Wheel wireless, and its excellent cord-free pedals had zero lag issues. For games like GTR 2, GRID and Gran Turismo 5, this is the racing wheel to own. *MG*

Razer Goliathus mouse mat

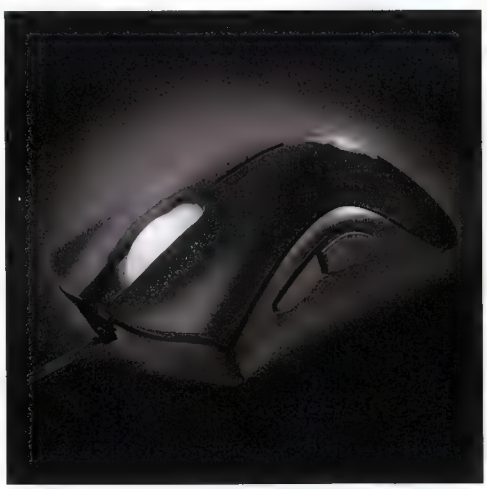
Portable THX comes home easy by way of The Razer Mako 2.1 bi-amplified multimedia speaker system. Available as a cloth or heavily textured weave in small, medium and oversized formats, Razer's Goliathus mouse mats are affordable and well-made. In testing, we found certain mice felt better on the cloth or textured weave. Logitech G5 and G7 users may prefer the textured surface, while those with Razer mice like the Death Adder and Lachesis may prefer the cloth weave. Will the Goliathus improve your gameplay? Like any good peripheral, yes. *MG*

Razer Lycosa

Looking for a down-to-earth gaming keyboard design with all the perks of those gaudy, over-complicated keyboards? Razer's Lycosa is a top notch back-lit Windows PC keyboard with fully programmable keys and macro recording, in addition to USB, headphone and mic ports. *MG*

Razer DeathAdder Mac Edition

Upon plugging in the Razer DeathAdder, I was hit by just how different the worlds of Mac and PC users are as I was bathed in the soft blue glow of the mouse's tribal tattoo-esque logo. Once that was turned off, the rest of my time with the DeathAdder was extremely positive. While I'm not 100% sold on its physical design, there's absolutely no denying that this is a well-built mouse that combines high-level precision with movement that's smooth as butter. I'm also thankful to see Razer give us Mac folks full driver and customization software support, though I wish the configuration app had more features for dynamic button profiles and far less Windows gaudiness. *EP*



Hercules

WEAPONS, SHIELDS, AND NO HOLDING BACK
MOW THESE DRUNKEN FOOLS NOW REAL WARRIORS FIGHT!
I BLAME THE FATES, AND NATURE, AND DESTINY
TO THE DEATH! IT'S THEIRS OR OURS!
TYDEUS!
BUT HOW CAN ANY MAN BLAME THE GODS
ARES, GOD OF WAR, I COULD FEEL ARES EVERYWHERE IN THAT HALL. I CAN'T SEE HIS GRIN
GUARDS! HOLD BARON HERE
HUH?
YOU OTHERS, PROTECT EACH OTHER'S BACKS... AND KILL EVERYTHING IN FRONT OF YOU!
AHH!
ARRGH!
GUHH!

"The writing and visuals are more reminiscent of adult-aimed graphic novels..."

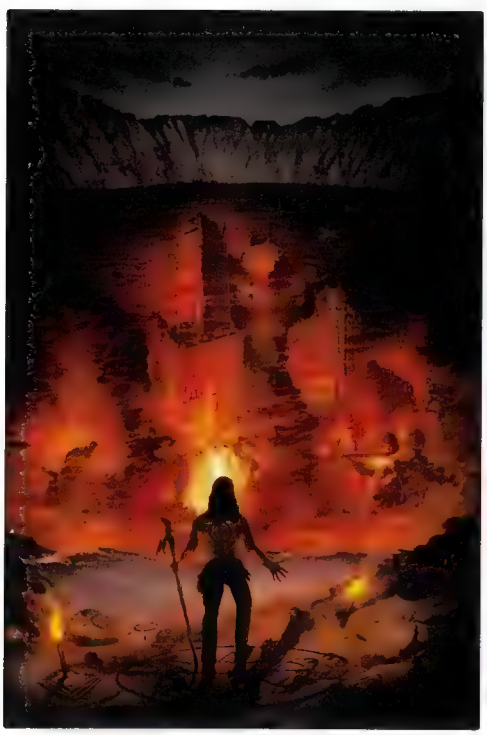
Comic Relief

Radical stirs up the panelled page

Here at Play HQ we receive towering piles of comic books from rookie publishers looking to break into the collector-crazed biz. And while an aversion to paper cuts keeps us from poring through every offering, the occasional gem does catch our eye. This month we bravely bandaged our precious digits to check out new-kid-on-the-comic-book-block Radical's debut reads *Hercules* and *Caliber*. Sporting durable cardstock covers and premium stock pages, both books stood out from the comparatively flimsy-paper pack. Of course, once we peeled back the covers, our enthusiasm over the quality construction was shoved aside in favor of our revitalized appreciation for comic book art and storytelling. Radical claims to foster a creatively rich family environment for its staff, and just a few pages in it's obvious they take this approach seriously.

The writing and visuals are more reminiscent of adult-aimed graphic novels than a monthly comic book release; *Hercules* recounts the tale of the titular hero with a gritty presentation that'll be immediately familiar to anyone who's had their brain melted by *Frank Miller's 300* or *Robert E. Howard's Conan* stories. And *Caliber*, an American old west-inspired retelling of Arthur and the Knight's of the Round Table—with a slick mystical six-shooter subbing for Excalibur—should appeal to fans of *Stephen King's Dark Tower* series and even HBO's *Deadwood*. While the high-concept stories are engaging, well paced and driven by strong protagonists, it'll be the art that grabs you first. Two pages into *Caliber* you'll discover a lone wolf tearing off the face of a corpse on a battle-scarred landscape. Not to be outdone in the corpse-decimating department, *Hercules'* second page sports a crow pecking at the eyes of an equally unlucky deceased dude, while another snacks on his bloody intestines. If that doesn't get you to your local comic shop, allow your globes to feast on the eye-candy adorning this page for some inspiration.

Both books, planned as five-part stories—with new mini-series slated for next year—have already released their first four installments (concluding issues will drop in August.) While buzz has been rapidly building for *Hercules* and *Caliber* since their May bows, Radical isn't ready to rest on their early success just yet; their creative wizards are currently hard at work on the sci-fi themed *Freedom Formula* and horror-inspired *City of Dust*. And if Radical's double-dose debut is any indication, we can look forward to aliens and monsters gnawing through skulls when these two new entries clutter comic retailer shelves later this year.



Caliber

IN MEMORY OF THOSE WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES SO THAT WE MAY BE FREE OF THE TYRANNY OF GOVERNMENTS...
...BUT FOR SPORT AND THE CELEBRATION OF FREEDOM!
AND THAT, RACE, FANS IS WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT!
WELCOME TO OUR RACE TO THE FUTURE--
WELCOME TO
FORMULA
INFINITY

Freedom Formula

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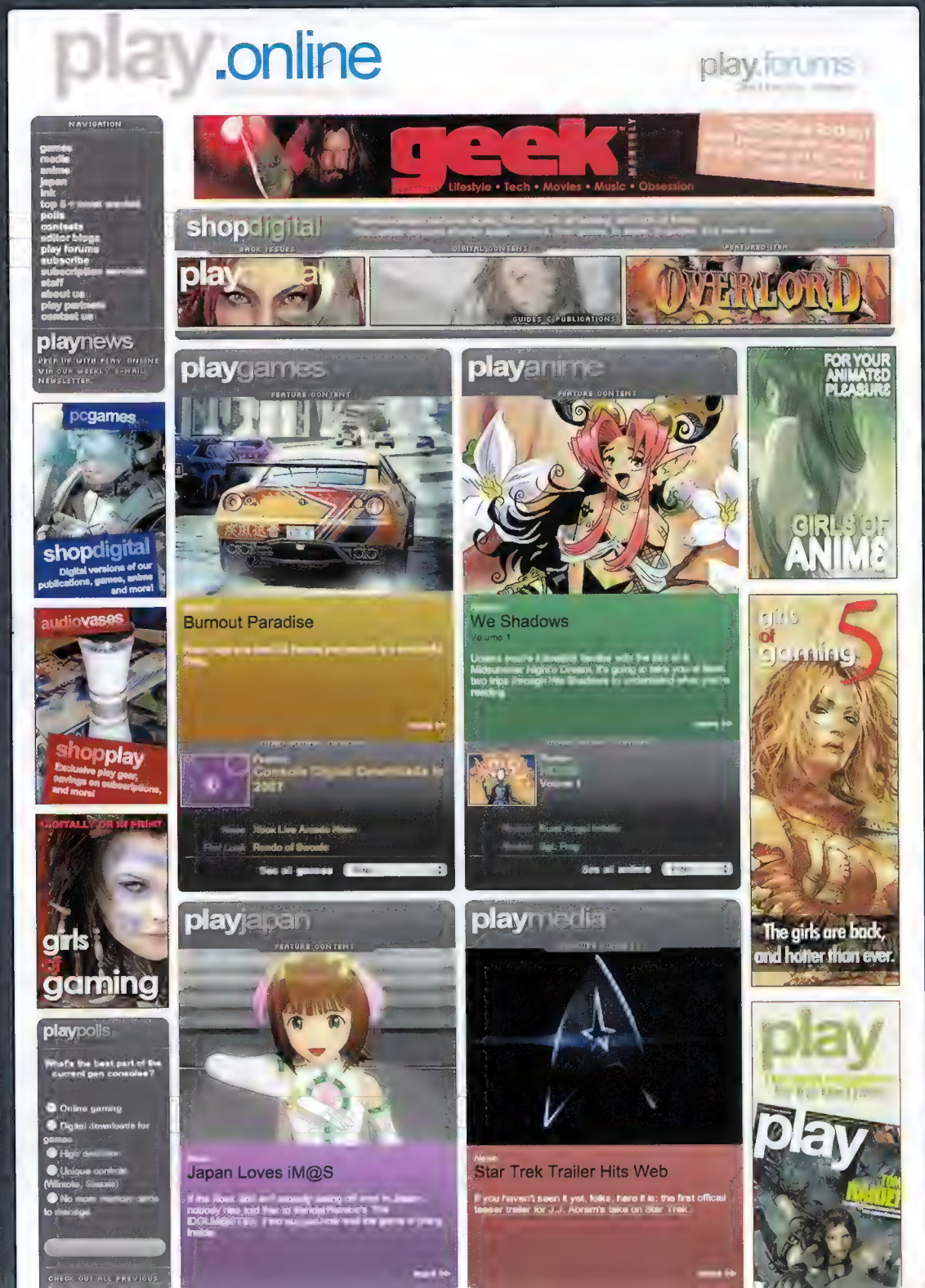
Or just drop by the friendliest forum around and say hi, the **play** way.



BACK OF THE BOOK

08_08 DAVE HALVERSON
PUBLISHER

I THINK TOO MUCH

"We've come to the point where the sell-by-date on the planet is so imminent that we're just riding it out, but at least it's going to be a fun ride."

I've been thinking a lot lately about how gaming has changed since making the transition from a "niche" industry to the "mainstream", which in America has come to define the lowest common denominator. Take the 4th of July for instance, which is tomorrow as I write this: We used to be able to celebrate the 4th in our backyards, exercising our rights as free citizens—which is what the holiday is all about—to shoot off fireworks and commemorate our independence day in whatever manner we chose. It's not my problem when some Neanderthal downs a 12-pak of Bud and blows his finger off. As Americans I have just as much right to shoot-off fireworks as he does to get liquored up and blow off his pinky. We used to say "live and learn" but that doesn't fly anymore. Since our legal system is set up to penalize companies when their products fall into the hands of nit-wits, it's a whole lot easier to just take away another right and make us all suffer. The 4th of July is a mainstream holiday now. You have to load the family into the SUV the government mandated to replace the electric car to go bake in the sun with a few thousand strangers to get your 15 minutes of fireworks now. The same thing has happened to video games on their road to the mainstream. Games used to be defined by their gameplay, not some bogus letter rating tacked on because too many parents were glued to the latest celebrity vagina sighting while there kids were mowing down pedestrians in the GTA game they bought them because they were too damn lazy to educate themselves beforehand or look at the damn package to see if it was appropriate. But hey, why go to the trouble of raising awareness when you can just tack on a letter and be done with it?

Charting the course from the 90s to present day (up until the genesis of the casual game), the systematic weeding-out of "hardcore games" (as in any game that actually requires skill) has been perpetrated predominantly by games based on either urban decay, war simulations, or firing off rounds of some kind, within quasi-realistic or realistic settings. Because as Americans, we're told that killing is as American as apple pie. The naked body and anything to do with sex is pure evil (some girl took food from a talking snake and blew that whole deal) but zooming in for an up close and personal bullet through the brain; that's for decent folks. The truth is that there is no right or wrong to it. Anyone should be able to play whatever makes them happy; I'm just saddened that it wasn't games like Final Fantasy that made gaming break through. I always thought "if they only knew the joys I have experienced and the worlds I have visited…how enriched my life has been by video games…" But that's not how it went down. No matter what ails the world, I've always found solace in video games. I had to earn my way in though; it took years of dedication to become a master, like it does any pastime, to reach the point where people would ooh-and-ah at how I jetted through complex levels. But that's hard, and that's not where the money was hiding. Why make people exert effort and develop skills—maybe even experience a sense of accomplishment, when you can just give them a gun and set them on a killing spree. Heck, give 'em a Sergeant to tell them who to kill even. The masses don't want all those wondrous creatures, fantasy, and complex gameplay—those are for kids! If only I'd ever met a kid who wanted to play anything rated "E". E for Everyone to a kid is poison. Plus E games are made by the gamers who came up on the games of the 90s, so they're too hard. Most M-rated games practically play themselves, and having to redo any stretch over a few-minutes long (in case you manage to "die") is considered a design flaw. Not that I want all games to be rock hard; games should be balanced according to who they're made for. I've grown tired of being coddled through games like some kind of mental midget. At least let me turn the how-to off. Let me figure *something* out on my own before you interrupt my virtual space with marching orders. I'm happy that there are games for beginners now; I just don't think those parameters should be mandatory in every game. Casual games are the best thing to come along since 3D for that very reason. Games should become mainstream by way of letting anyone escape into their worlds. Guitar hero, Rock Band, Cooking Mama, Viva Piñata these are all assets to the world of video games. What makes me angry is when the games that I (and many of our readers) love are crucified for not conforming to the dictum of the status quo. To be told by an advertising agency or product manager that our magazine isn't right for "E" games because we're too "mature" is infuriating. We have to write tripe and look like Disney Adventures to qualify our appreciation for non-violent skill-based games? It's sad that so many game companies have become too busy to represent their own titles. Hey, that leads to actual intelligent marketing, better press coverage and higher sales…the horror! It's easier to pay someone else to market your game based on spread sheets. I believe it's called the trickledown effect.

So here we are, enjoying the mainstream… Gas is 5 bucks a gallon and I hear more about Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears, and Michael Jackson sightings than what anyone is going to do about it, but at least video games are thriving. We've come to the point where the sell-by-date on the planet is so imminent that we're just riding it out, but at least it's going to be a fun ride. I mean, who has the time to try to change anything when Brad and Angelina were spotted at the grocery store? They must be scrutinized! Gotta catch all the juicy commentary before Dancing with the "Stars" comes on! Whether America does wake up, or slowly becomes the next Mad Max sequel, is it too much to ask to enjoy my critter-based epics and various action/adventures without having to be reminded that the average on Game Rankings doesn't echo my enthusiasm? I don't pretend to be the authority on Call of Duty now do I? I just want to enjoy as many Crash, Conker, Kameos, Brutal Legends and Darksiders as I can before the big cryo-sleep (or we colonize space, whichever comes first) and the more heroines and less token GI-Joe's the better. You might even want to try one yourself: Games that lift your spirit rather than shake the humanity out of it or push you to sharpen your skills. The sense of accomplishment is well worth the effort, and who knows, you just might find that magic that gaming was built on.

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PLAYSTATION 3

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